



# Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH):

## GENDER AND LEADERSHIP STUDY



CENTRE FOR  
HUMANITARIAN  
LEADERSHIP

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USA)
CHL	Centre for Humanitarian Leadership
CSO	Civil society organisation
DESLH	Dipl��me d'��tudes Sup��rieures en Leadership Humanitaire
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-based violence
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Assault
UN	United Nations

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.1 Introduction

There is growing recognition that diversity and inclusion within leadership and decision-making roles are fundamental for an effective crisis and humanitarian response. In 2000, for instance, the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325 called for member states to increase women's leadership in peace building and conflict resolution, recognizing the role of women as critical to effective humanitarian responses.

Women's leadership is of both intrinsic and instrumental value to the humanitarian system. Gender equality is an intrinsic right, in leadership as in all areas of life. Instrumentally, increasing evidence demonstrates that women are effective at engaging with and advocating for highly marginalized people—including women and children—affected by crises, and ensuring gender-based violence and related areas are prioritized in crisis response planning.

However, globally, women are underrepresented in leadership roles in the humanitarian system.

### Report structure

This report examines gender equality and leadership in the context of the Francophone humanitarian system. Interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions were conducted in French, and translated for analysis and reporting. The aim is to identify key causes of the persistent gender imbalance in the Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH) cohorts, with a view to develop evidence-based strategies for the Centre of Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) and key stakeholders to improve the gender ratio in future iterations of the course. Findings may also be of interest to others working in humanitarian education and development, and those working in gendered leadership spaces across sectors.

Chapter 2 lays out the wider evidence on gender and leadership in the Francophone humanitarian system. Chapter 3 presents findings on the attitudes towards gender equality within the wider Francophone humanitarian community, reporting on key findings from an online survey conducted in French for this

study. Chapter 4 uses this contextual landscape to investigate the persistent gender imbalance within the DESLH. Chapters 5 and 6 present main findings and recommendations for inform the Centre's strategy for increasing the number of women in future cohorts of the DESLH.

## 1.2 Key findings

There is widespread support from within the Francophone humanitarian system for increasing the number of women in leadership roles.

Significant barriers, however, impede progress towards gender equality in the humanitarian system. Pervasive gender norms in leadership, humanitarian work, and family environments, as well as a comparative lack of educational opportunity, all compound to limit women's access to decision-making levels in organisations.

Women's perceived 'lack of confidence' was one of the most frequently cited barriers to progress towards women's leadership reported in the Francophone survey. Male and female respondents alike suggest that women 'under-estimate' themselves and lack the confidence to put themselves forward as—and be recognized as—leaders in their organisations. This gendered perception is interrogated in this study.

When asked what strategies could overcome these barriers, respondents suggested a range of options, including quotas and positive discrimination, gender transformative policies such as maternity leave and gender-blind recruitment, political will and advocacy, and interventions to tackle 'toxic masculinity' and misogynistic work cultures.

A frequently cited recommendation for overcoming barriers to women's leadership are training and development opportunities for women. Training was recommended partly to address the perceived lack of confidence among women, and to provide formal recognition of women's leadership skills.

The DESLH aims to provide a learning space in which all participants—particularly women, and those from local and national NGOs—improve their leadership knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Monitoring and

evaluation data indicate the course is achieving this goal for graduates.

Unfortunately, there has been a persistent gender imbalance within the DESLH, with on average a 1:3 female to male ratio over the six cohorts.

This gender imbalance in part reflects gender disparities within the humanitarian system in West and Central Africa. The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership conducted this research study, however, to identify compounding factors that are within the control of the Centre, to develop data-driven strategies to make progress towards gender parity by 2025.

The good news is that once women are enrolled in the program, they are thriving. Female students achieve on average higher grades, and are more likely to graduate, than their male peers.

This high achievement is notable given many female graduates reported anxieties about their abilities to perform in a higher-education learning setting, particularly given their comparative lack of educational attainment. In contrast, none of the male DESLH graduates interviewed for this study expressed comparable concerns about their own educational level or ability to study in a higher education setting.

The DESLH is also improving the knowledge and confidence of participants, including women, with post-course surveys indicating impressive gains in core humanitarian leadership and coordination resources and subjects.

The problem is not, therefore, that the DESLH is failing to provide a feminist space for women's leadership and learning, nor is the imbalance a function of admissions. The problem is that too few women are applying in the first place. While many of the barriers are beyond the remit of CHL, this report investigates avenues for recruiting more women into the DESLH.

Findings indicate that recruitment and marketing could better target female candidates, including amplifying existing channels such as the CHL website, but also identifying new channels such as sub-national women's humanitarian networks.

The DESLH selection criteria are also seen to alienate some potential female candidates who may not have—or perceive themselves as not having—the requisite skills and experience for this program. Women typically have lower overall educational attainment (secondary and post-secondary qualifications) in many countries in West and Central Africa, and so may lack experience in applying for or attending higher education courses.

Associated with this finding is the perception that the DESLH is a competitive postgraduate certificate, which may be perceived as out of reach for many women working in the humanitarian system in West and Central Africa.

Female graduates also mentioned that financial costs present a barrier to women's participation in the DESLH, not just in terms of course fees but costs associated with childcare during online and residential intensives. Women typically have fewer personal funds and less control over family budgets, particularly those coming from low-income settings, and so report having to justify this additional expense to partners and workplaces.

It is the aim of this study to generate data-driven recommendations for addressing these barriers in the context of the DESLH, to increase the number of women graduating from the course.

There are limits, however, to what leadership development courses can do to increase women's representation in leadership roles in the international humanitarian system. While the DESLH can increase the pipeline of female graduates from West and Central Africa with accredited humanitarian leadership qualifications, the course cannot directly address all the systemic barriers to women's leadership.

The supposition that leadership courses can be a 'solution' to this systemic issue of gender inequality is also problematic, as it problematizes women's perceived lack of confidence, and places the burden of change on women.

Meaningful and systemic improvements in gender equality will require recognizing and addressing the entrenched gender norms and barriers, and strategically working to remove and mitigate these barriers, to women's leadership.

## 3.1 Conclusions and next steps

There is widespread support for increasing the number of female leaders in the Francophone humanitarian system, and evidence-based instrumental and intrinsic reasons for aspiring to do so. The barriers to achieving gender equality and improving diversity are entrenched and may seem insurmountable. However, this report outlines key strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Leadership development is among the most frequently cited strategies for improving the knowledge, skills and practices—as well as confidence—of female leaders in the field.

The Centre for Humanitarian Leadership can build on the insights outlined in this report for future recruitment strategies for the DESLH and other leadership courses.

Further research and advocacy are needed to shed light on women's experiences—including barriers to and solutions for achieving gender equality in the humanitarian system.

However, there are limits to what leadership development courses can do. A concerted effort within and between stakeholders, including leadership development providers, donors, and organisations at all levels of the system is necessary to enable equitable access to leadership for all genders in humanitarian response.

### Gender: scope and definition

This evaluation study adopts the definition of gender published in the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards*, which recognises 'that people experience a situation differently according to their gender.' Gender is not exclusively to do with girls and women: rather, it recognises that girls, women, men, boys, non-binary, and gender-diverse people experience crises, disasters, and humanitarian contexts differently, and have diverse needs.

The rationale for this research study, however, is motivated by course data confirming a) that female-identifying humanitarians apply for and enrol into the DESLH in fewer numbers than male-identifying participants; and b) the absence of non-binary identifying participants in the DESLH. There are many complex reasons why there are no self-identifying non-binary or other identifying participants in the DESLH alumni. But in the absence of data, addressing non-binary and gender-diverse aspects of gender in the DESLH—while wholly worthy of further research—is beyond the scope of this study.

*Source: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

*[The UN]...urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.<sup>1</sup> [UN Security Council, Resolution 1325]*

There is growing recognition that diversity and inclusion in leadership across all levels of the system are critical for effective humanitarian responses. The 2000 United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325 was a key moment in the formal recognition of the need for increased women's leadership within the international humanitarian system.<sup>2</sup> Resolution 1325 recognised that women's participation in and leadership of peace-building and conflict resolution are instrumental to achieving gender equality and addressing women's needs and experiences of conflict. The UN called on member states to commit to women's leadership at the national, regional, and international level for effective 'prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.'

The UN's call to action on gender and leadership was reaffirmed subsequently in the *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards* (2011), which made an explicit link between the effectiveness of 'humanitarian responses' and gender, understood as the differentiated needs of men, women, girls, and boys:

*'Humanitarian responses are more effective when they are based on an understanding of the different needs, vulnerabilities, interests, capacities and coping strategies of women and men, girls and boys of all ages and the differing impacts of disaster or conflict upon them.'*<sup>3</sup>

Through these and other affirmations, the necessity for diverse decision-makers who can understand these 'differing impacts' of gender and engage with and advocate for affected communities has become an established priority across the international humanitarian system.

It is in this wider transformative vision of the system that the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) is committed to cultivating a 'diverse humanitarianism that embraces the agency of affected people and promotes distributed power, social justice and equity.' Through the *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire* (DESLH) programme in particular, the Centre aims to provide a platform in particular for women and local and national NGO staff from West and Central Africa to undertake a high-quality, Francophone humanitarian leadership certificate to recognise and develop their leadership skills.<sup>4</sup>

However, a sustained gender imbalance within the DESLH is a barrier to the Centre achieving this vision. Since the DESLH was launched in 2017, the number of women applying for the course has remained consistently lower than for male students (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, 208 students had graduated from the DESLH, 34% of whom were women (n=70) and 66% of whom are men (n=138). The proportion of women to men in each of the six cohorts to date has been around 1:3: a ratio which, despite improvements for Cohort 5 (closer to 1:2), has not consistently improved over time.

This gender imbalance is problematic, both intrinsically, in terms of gender equality in the DESLH; and functionally, as a barrier to the DESLH achieving its aim of shaping the next generation of humanitarian leaders in West and Central Africa to shape a more equitable, inclusive, and representative system.

<sup>1</sup> (2000). United National Resolution 1325 (2000), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Domingo, P. (2013). Evaluation of UN Women's Contribution to Increasing Women's Leadership and Participation in Peace and Security and Humanitarian Response: Headquarter and global case study. Overseas Development Institute., p.17

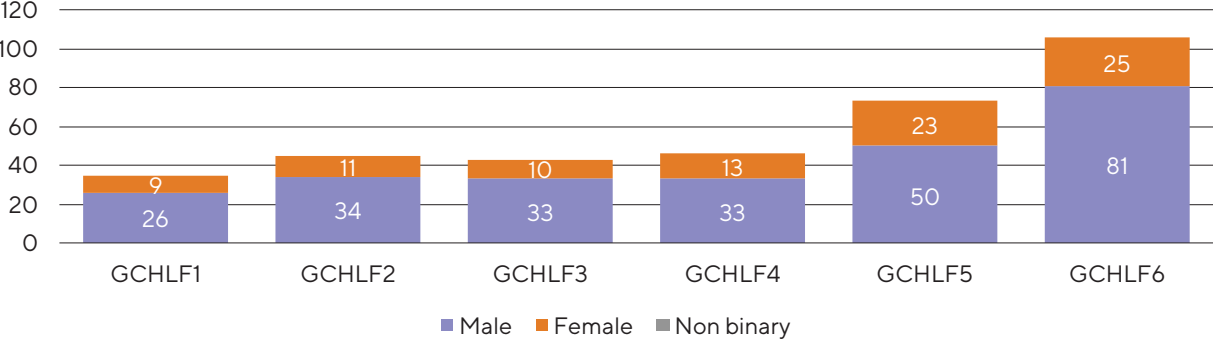
<sup>3</sup> The Sphere Project. [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response](#). 2011 edition, p.15

<sup>4</sup> (Centre for Humanitarian Leadership 2022b)

<sup>5</sup> Please note: the terms men/women and male/ female are used throughout this report, although there are different approaches to when to use these terms based on sex (female/male) vs gender (woman/man).

**Figure 1.** The gender imbalance in the DESLH has remained at around 1:3

Alumni disaggregated by gender and type of organisation (n=208)



NB: Some 're-joiners' (students who dropped out but re-enrolled later) are counted multiple times if they enrolled in multiple cohorts.

**Aim of this study**

Acknowledging this gender imbalance, the DESLH 2022-25 strategy lays out a target for increasing the proportion of women graduating from the program to at least 50% by 2025.

- Investigating the factors contributing to the low rates of application and enrolment in the DESLH amongst women; and
- identifying potential strategies to increase women’s participation in the course.

The aim of this research study is to contribute to this goal of improving the number of women in the DESLH through:

The intended outcome is to develop evidence-based strategies for achieving progress towards the 2025 target, and to contribute to the wider discourse about the need for more inclusive and representative leadership for effective humanitarian responses.



## 2. GENDER AND HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

There is a limited but growing amount of literature on female leadership in the humanitarian specifically. To complement the review, we have thus included relevant research from other professional fields. Please note, the DESLH is targeted to the Francophone world, but dominated by colleagues from West and Central Africa, which is reflected in the scope of this literature review.

### **There is a lack of female leaders in the international humanitarian system.**

The Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards (2011) states that ‘humanitarian responses are more effective when they are based on an understanding of the different needs, vulnerabilities, interests, capacities and coping strategies of women and men, girls and boys of all ages and the differing impacts of disaster or conflict upon them.’<sup>i</sup> To achieve this nuanced and complex understanding requires diverse leadership that reflects the experiences and perspectives of all involved in humanitarian responses.

Yet, despite a growing recognition of the importance of leadership diversity, research shows that women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles in the international humanitarian system.<sup>ii</sup> Overall, humanitarian leadership structures remain ‘largely unrepresentative of the people they serve’ in terms of gender and race.<sup>iii, iv</sup> In a Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) assessment of progress on gender responsiveness within the humanitarian sector, Daigle states that ‘we continue to see a majority of white, European or North American men occupying senior leadership positions regardless of the setting.’<sup>v</sup> Critically, this observation addresses the intersection of gender with race. While studies on humanitarian leadership rarely explore the intersectionality of gender with race, age, sexuality, nationality, it is likely that the prevailing gender inequality is significantly exacerbated for women of colour<sup>vi</sup> given the prevalence of institutional racism

in the humanitarian sector, and what we know about the impacts of intersectionality.<sup>vii</sup>

Available data shows that for the humanitarian sector in Francophone Africa, this picture of an underrepresentation of women in leadership is the same. As Novy-Marx in a review of recent developments in women’s transformative leadership argues,

*‘Women in Africa face particularly high barriers to becoming leaders. These include social and cultural barriers, traditional gender roles, the low status of women in many societies, and limited access to educational and employment opportunities...the small number of women in leadership positions across fields from business to science and politics in Africa is both an indicator of these barriers, and a barrier itself...these challenges are not unique to Africa, yet the share of African women enrolled in secondary and tertiary education, in formal employment and in government leadership positions is particularly low compared to that of most other world regions’<sup>viii</sup>*

The UN Gender Parity Dashboard data indicates a 30:70 split between female and male international contract staff on UN Mission in Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the UN Regional Office for Central Africa. When disaggregated for UN international contract staff at professional level P3 (which requires a minimum of five years’ work experience) to P5, only 37% of international contact staff at UNROCA and MINUSCA are female compared to 54% in UNOWA), indicating that seniority correlates with a gender imbalance.<sup>6</sup>

### **The reasons for this underrepresentation are complex.**

Across Africa women remain underrepresented in education at all tiers while the Sub-Saharan African

<sup>6</sup> An outlier to this picture is the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), which reports a breakdown of 47% men, 53% women among a total of just 36 international contract staff (UN 2022). More research is required to account for this difference.

region has the highest gender gap in education of any in the world.<sup>ix</sup> Despite improvements in gender parity in tertiary education<sup>xi</sup> – this is not reflected in the number of women in leadership positions.<sup>xii</sup> Across all professional fields too, women face a host of cultural, social and organisational barriers<sup>xiii</sup> to accessing leadership roles, in particular at senior level.<sup>xiiii</sup> According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, Sub-Saharan Africa has closed only approximately 68 percent of its gender gap in economic empowerment and in politics only 18 percent of the region's gender gap has been closed.<sup>xv</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa thus remains the third most challenging region of the world for women to rise to positions of leadership in government. There are significant exceptions at the national level such as Rwanda, which has the highest rate of female parliamentarians in the world (63.8 percent) and in Senegal and South Africa, where women also make up a large share of parliamentary seats, at 43 percent and 42 percent respectively.<sup>xvi</sup> However, many other African countries have much lower rates, and the identified social and cultural barriers to women's leadership in politics echoes across leadership in other areas of work including the humanitarian sector.<sup>xvii</sup>

The literature highlights how deeply embedded prevailing gender norms and related power relations are both within humanitarian organisations, and in the origins and nature of humanitarianism itself.<sup>xviii</sup> Daigle notes that 'agencies and institutions come with their own sets of norms, inequalities and unconscious biases that are shaped not only by gender but by sexuality, disability, racialisation and socioeconomic class – and these carry over to programmes and projects.'<sup>xix</sup> Although gender mainstreaming and 'well-meaning gender policies'<sup>xx</sup> have visibly increased in the humanitarian sector<sup>xxi</sup>, Hart and Krueger point out 'these are largely seen by gender experts as at best generic, neglecting power differentials, different local contexts, and sectoral fields.'<sup>xxii</sup> For Gupta et al., 'despite high aspirations and many valiant efforts, the humanitarian sector is falling short of its commitment to promote gender equality and empower women and girls.'<sup>xxiii</sup> For Patel et al, the precarious contexts in which humanitarian work takes place additionally exacerbate gender inequality in leadership as 'deeply embedded discrimination against women at the organisational, cultural, social, financial and political levels is exacerbated in conflict'.<sup>xxiiii</sup>

## Gendered perceptions of leadership are a key limiting factor.

Several studies connect the humanitarian context with highly gendered conceptions and perceptions of what a leader 'looks like'.<sup>xxv</sup> For example, Gupta et al note that 'the culture of humanitarian organizations has been characterized as hierarchical and driven by a short-term crisis response with a distinctly macho style of functioning, which is misaligned with gender mainstreaming.'<sup>xxvi</sup> They go on to add, 'the domain of conflict and humanitarian health also uniquely positions itself in non-permissive and often highly securitised and politicised contexts in which attitudes and assumptions towards leadership are predominantly male-normed.'<sup>xxvii</sup> Examining the factors inhibiting women from taking up leadership positions on the African continent, particularly in health, Oyebanji and Okereke point out that in research and other activities 'women were asked to design interventions – but when they are successful, men are asked to lead them.'<sup>xxviii</sup> They also note that opportunities for women often open up in times of crisis 'but these are subsequently dismissed or unsupported' – a finding that is strongly backed by Jessica Alexander who argues in *The New Humanitarian* that the hope that 'crises are moments of change' is routinely undermined by a failure to 'make big shifts in the status quo'.<sup>xxix</sup>

Patel et al. also highlight 'unsupportive organisational cultures, significant persistent motherhood leadership penalties and systemic obstacles to accessing opportunities for career progression continue to hamper women in this particularly male-dominated sphere'.<sup>xxx</sup> Oyebanji and Okereke point out that the disproportionate expectations placed on women to deliver care for children and other dependants, invariably affects their career progression.<sup>xxxi</sup> Stead raises another oft-cited limiting factor related to women's 'perceptions of themselves... issues of self-confidence, physical appearance and visibility'.<sup>xxxii</sup> Yet, this issue, while important, must be approached carefully: over-emphasising individual agency and responsibility for change runs the risk of neglecting the systemic barriers that prevent the emergence of female leaders in the first place.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Importantly, gender discrimination can also be implicit in the failure to locate women leadership as central to overall systemic transformation. For example, where Spiegel describes a 'broken' humanitarian system, and urges to 'remake, not

simply revise, leadership and coordination', he does not mention the importance of supporting and enabling female leaders in effecting this. This neglect of women leaders in this regard could also be a part of what is a minority view - including within the humanitarian system - that women's representation in leadership positions is neither per se desirable nor a priority. These attitudes may be nuanced and important to keep in mind on the grounds that the very framing of this debate is gender essentialising, and perpetuates a binary conceptualisation of gender that excludes non-binary and gender diverse individuals.<sup>xxxiii</sup> However, when such attitudes about women in leadership are grounded in entrenched and damaging gender norms, such views risk perpetuating the barriers debarring women from free and full participation and equality in the humanitarian system.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### The case for increasing female leadership<sup>xxxv</sup>

As a matter of basic social justice, promoting female leadership has an intrinsic value as a 'desirable objective in and of itself'<sup>xxxvi</sup>: 'women should participate equally in decision making and lead interventions which affect their lives.'<sup>xxxvii</sup> This must be emphasised: women should not be required to 'prove' their 'added value' to be included, and any discussion of the specific benefits of female leadership should be framed in this context.

That said, there is growing evidence that increasing the proportion of female leaders improves crisis and emergency responses, particularly for highly marginalised individuals and communities.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Research documents 'the achievements and value of women led organisations and movements in the social justice and development sectors.'<sup>xxxix</sup> As Jayasinghe et al., suggest, 'women's leadership brings a greater awareness of, and responsiveness to, women's gender-based needs in the context of humanitarian emergencies.'<sup>xl</sup> More women in positions that enable them to make decisions, allocate budgets and set agendas means a higher chance that that concerns specifically affecting women in humanitarian crises are advocated for and prioritised.<sup>xli</sup> Care International also found that women have a specific 'ability to use social capital and networks to reach other women', 'to provide a space for and raise women's voices and support women's leadership, 'to provide solidarity to other women and girls in day-to-day spaces and activism' and to contribute 'to interventions being gender transformative and potentially more sustainable.'<sup>xlii</sup> UN OCHA found that

'women leaders from the humanitarian system bring three unique and valuable attributes to humanitarian responses: the ability to speak to women from affected communities; unique perspectives; and a unique style of leadership.'<sup>xliii</sup> Tamaru and O'Reilly point out that 'women's organizations may bridge the gap between the formal process and their communities, particularly when government-led public engagement is absent or insufficient.'<sup>xliv</sup> These insights are captured specifically in the milestone United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325 of 2000 recognised that women's participation in peace building and conflict resolution is instrumental to achieving gender equality and addressing women's particular needs and experiences of conflict.<sup>xlv</sup>

There are certainly specific experiences - such as that of pregnancy and motherhood - that can add a much-needed perspective to humanitarian responses. Yet, it is critical to keep in mind how deeply gendered assumptions about supposedly 'female' characteristics and qualities are.<sup>xlvi</sup> According to Powell, assertions 'that the world would be better...if women assumed leadership positions in peace and security matters are unapologetically instrumentalist and reinforce essentialist views of women.'<sup>xlvii</sup> Kennedy and Dingli echo this view, stating that 'the equation of women with peace is not one based on fact but on powerful discourses.'<sup>xlviii</sup> Given that ideas about women as more nurturing, compassionate, and accommodating have historically limited rather than enhanced women's progression to positions of authority and influence, Powell and others thus caution against essentialising women's management and 'leadership styles', as this may ultimately undermine their access to leadership through the backdoor.<sup>xlix</sup>

### Interventions to increase female representation in humanitarian leadership

Research evidence on 'what works' to improve the gender balance in leadership roles at the system-level within the international humanitarian system is limited. While the need for change is recognised at a global level by the UN and other key humanitarian actors, it is also evident that key 'blind spots' and sticking points remain<sup>l</sup> as this review shows.

### Accountability

Hopkins et al argue that there needs to be 'accountability at all organizational levels' to prove commitment to sustainable and substantial increases in female leadership<sup>li</sup> For Daigle too,

'demonstrated commitment to inclusion, including on gender, should be a prerequisite for leadership positions.' She argues that 'gender experts need to be embedded into humanitarian teams and in more senior positions, so that they can advise (or indeed become) leaders, and so that mitigating gendered harms and supporting opportunities can be a core part of recovery.'<sup>lii</sup>

### Strategic planning and creating opportunities

Hopkins et al., propose that comprehensive leadership development needs to consider 'assessment, training and education, coaching, mentoring, networking, experiential learning...and career planning.'<sup>liii</sup> UN Women distinguish between direct and indirect support for women's leadership and participation, working towards more women involved 'in national political, legislative and policymaking processes, national peace talks and international conferences' while also creating 'enabling conditions' for gender mainstreaming and heightening awareness of women's rights, perspectives and the need for gender-sensitive services.<sup>liv</sup>

Organisations need to actively support women in gaining further qualifications, mentoring, coaching and experience that 'open up access to leadership opportunities'.<sup>lv</sup> The support should specifically include 'strategic career planning' which women are less likely to do than men (and organisations are less likely to encourage women to do).<sup>lvi</sup> It is also critical to 'help the organization become aware of bias in merit-based decisions using assessment tools; provide training to reduce possible evaluation bias; and work to deconstruct gender stereotypes around leadership'.<sup>lvii</sup>

### Working with women's realities

Approaches need to be tailored to the specific conditions of women in 'the early, middle, and later stages of their careers'<sup>lviii</sup> and cognizant of the many factors that may act as barriers or 'penalties' in career advancement. While this area requires more research about the 'motherhood leadership penalty' (i.e., mothers being 'less likely to be chosen for new roles and promotions, will earn lower salaries, and be held to a higher standard than fathers and non-mothers'), it is likely that a similar penalty is levied on mothers in the humanitarian sector too.<sup>lix</sup>

### Focusing on the local level

It is important to address gender roles and imbalances in leadership at the local level, focussing on strengthening women-led organisations and more localised international humanitarian systems that are shaped and driven by local responses.<sup>lxi</sup> While this approach does not *only* or *directly* address women's representation in leadership roles, it is key to exposing and alleviating gender discrimination leadership within broader global systems of power. As Action Aid specify, any response should aim to shift 'the power from North to South, from international to local and from a male-dominated system to one where women play a more central role'.<sup>lxii</sup> This means to prioritise 'national, local and community responses to inform a broader, international approach' rather than the other way around.<sup>lxiii</sup>

### Networks and support specifically for and by women

A report by Jayasinghe et al examines women's leadership in locally led humanitarian action with case studies from Bangladesh and South Sudan finds that encouraging collaboration between women leaders, women's organizations, and LHL actors achieves progress toward a more gender-transformative humanitarian system.<sup>lxiii</sup> Vinnicombe and Singh also emphasise that 'in addition to, and not as a substitute for, other leadership courses and support mechanisms...women-only training enables women to clarify their leadership ambitions, recognise their leadership strengths and access leadership positions'.<sup>lxiv</sup> Stead similarly suggests that leadership training for *women only* may provide an 'environment where women participants can experience a sense of belonging and identification, and are able to construct personally and socially acceptable narratives about their experience'.<sup>lxv</sup>

## 2.1 Conclusion

Despite a growing recognition of the importance of leadership diversity, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles in the humanitarian sector, including francophone Africa. Research on proven methods to improve the gender balance in leadership roles within the international humanitarian system is limited. Existing approaches emphasise the need for comprehensive support

and promotion, accountability mechanisms for organisations, the need for support to be tailored to the different states of women's lives, the importance of 'women-only' support and a focus on the local level in a bid to address discrimination and power inequalities comprehensively.

Approaches to promoting female leadership need to reflect even more deeply on inherent gender stereotypes. This is particularly critical in discussions and arguments that rest on the specific 'benefits' of female leadership.

Adequate representation of women in leadership positions is a matter of basic social justice. Although there is growing evidence that increasing the

proportion of female leaders improves crisis and emergency responses, but women are not and should not be required to 'prove' their 'added value' to be included.

There is a critical difference between acknowledging how specific perspectives of women add a much needed perspective to humanitarian responses and perpetuating deeply gendered assumptions about supposedly 'female' characteristics and qualities<sup>lxvi</sup> Given that stereotypes about women as more nurturing, compassionate, and accommodating have historically limited rather than enhanced women's progression to positions of authority, essentialising women's distinct 'leadership styles' runs the risk of ultimately undermining their access to leadership through the backdoor.<sup>lxvii</sup>

### 3. PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE FRANCOPHONE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

*'In my opinion, gender has nothing to do with leadership, everyone can be a good leader, because it depends on leadership technique, motivation, state of mind and not on strength'. Government/ ministry respondent, Gender survey, Q.3.7*

Social and cultural perceptions—or how individuals and societies view women in position in power—matter fundamentally to the cause of advancing gender equality in leadership.<sup>7</sup> Any assessment of gender imbalances within leadership development programs like the DESLH needs to be considered, therefore, in the wider system context in which that profession and gender dynamics are operating.

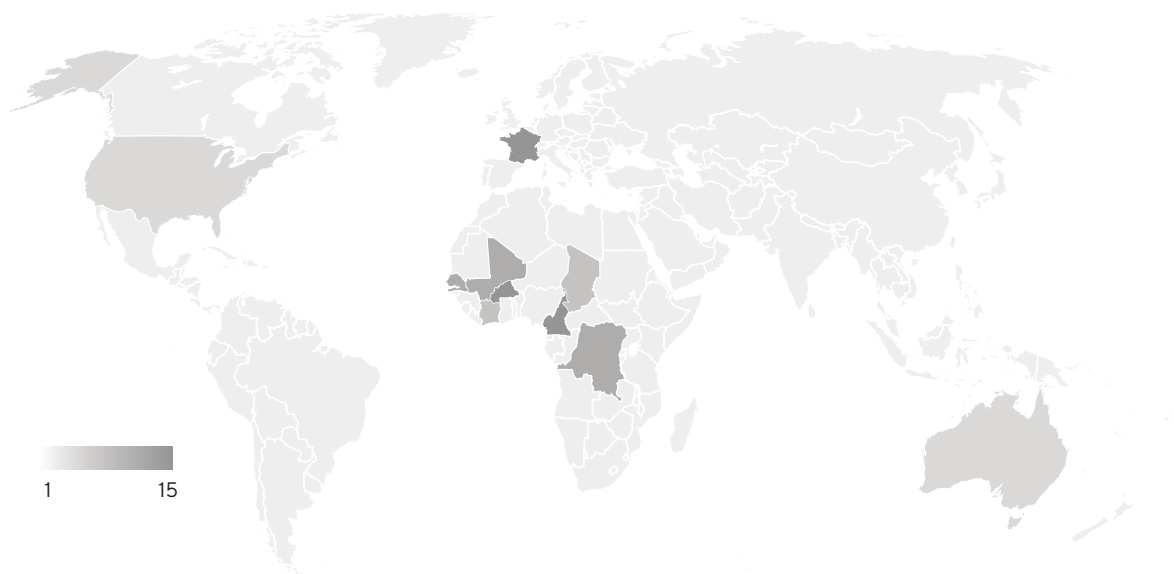
As part of this evaluation study, therefore, an anonymous, online, French-language survey was distributed in the Francophone humanitarian community, generating 115 consenting respondents over an 8-week period.

Respondents came from at least 21 countries, primarily in Central and West Africa, with Burkina Faso, France, and Cameroon generating the highest response rates (Figure 3).

While a small sample, these survey responses highlighted a plethora of considerations, challenges, and opportunities relevant to the question of gender and leadership within the Francophone humanitarian system. This chapter presents key findings from the survey responses, bolstered with insights from the interviews and focus group discussions with DESLH graduates. The chapter is organised into three sections:

- **Attitudes** towards gender equality in humanitarian leadership
- **Perceived barriers** to gender equality in humanitarian leadership
- **Strategies and interventions** for improving gender equality in humanitarian leadership

**Figure 2.** Survey respondents represent at least 21 countries



<sup>7</sup> See for instance The Reykjavik Index, which measures how people feel about women in power across countries. Please note, the Index does not include any African countries.

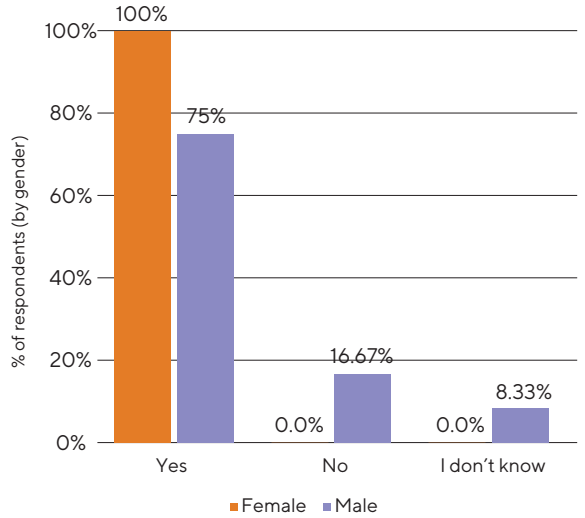
### 3.1 Attitudes towards gender equality in humanitarian leadership

There is widespread support for increasing women’s representation in leadership roles within the Francophone humanitarian community.

A significant majority of respondents from the general Francophone community supported increasing women’s representation in leadership roles.

**Figure 3.** There is strong support among men and women for increasing women’s leadership in the humanitarian system

Is it important to increase the representation of women in senior positions in the humanitarian system? (n=61)



100% of female respondents and 75% of male respondents agreed that increasing women’s representation in the humanitarian system is important (Figure 3).

17% of male respondents selected ‘non’ to this item, with several of these indicating that performance, promotion, or selection must be based on ‘merit’ and not gender.

One 38-year-old male survey respondent from Cameroon expressed the typical stance on this minority position in the following terms:

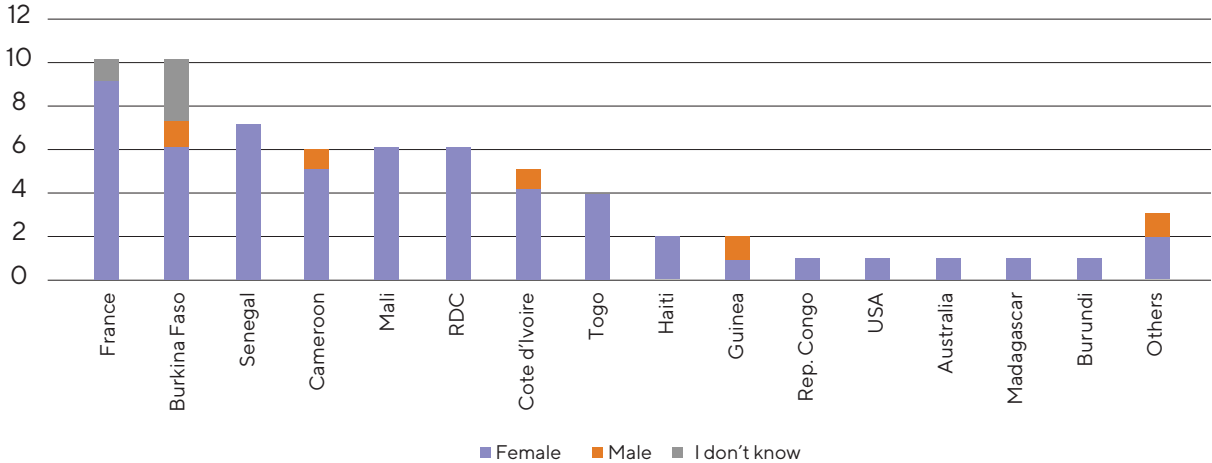
*‘Organisations encourage women to apply for the various positions. This is already an incentive to increase the number of women. However, any empowerment must be based on competence, personal qualification and technical performance.’*

In other words, the dominant perception among the minority group who selected ‘non’ or ‘je ne sais pas’ posits that promotion and recognition to leadership roles in the humanitarian system ought to be based on ‘merit,’ and not gender. Such a position—which might on the face of it seem reasonable—suggests that the entrenched structural and systemic roots involved in the framing and perceptions of ‘merit’ may not be appreciated when it comes to gender and leadership in the humanitarian system.

There are, however, alternative views within this minority set of ‘non’ respondents which add nuance to the debate. As one male survey respondent from

**Figure 4.** National disaggregation from Francophone respondents

Is it important to increase the representation of women in senior positions in the humanitarian system? (n=61; 36 male; 25 female, disaggregated by nationality)



Cameroon explained, he selected 'non' because he rejected the binary framing of the survey item itself: 'Gender cannot be reduced to the binary of women and men. Gender makes sense in diversity.'

This nuanced response from a male Cameroonian respondent highlights the need for caution in interpreting results (see national disaggregation below), and contextualizing quantitative findings with qualitative insights into the perspectives, experiences, and insights of respondents.

In-depth interviews with DESLH graduates and Francophone humanitarians shed further light on respondents' attitudes towards gender equality and leadership within the system.

### **Inclusive leadership improves the humanitarian response.**

Most interviewees agreed it is important to increase women's representation in leadership positions within the humanitarian system. When asked why, these respondents shed light on a range of views.

Male and female respondents argued that having more female leaders would contribute to achieving gender equality and social justice in principles. One female participant explicitly argued, for instance, that equality in leadership positions it is 'a matter of social justice' and will help 'fight against gender inequality' [4AlumF]. Another female graduate said that having more female leaders would help to 'dismantle the norms created by patriarchal societies.' Within this category of responses, women's leadership was seen to be a virtuous cycle, generating more role models for girls and women: many participants believed that seeing female leaders helps 'strengthen confidence' and 'provides an example' that helps 'encourage' and 'push' other women who don't yet have the courage to become leaders.

Several respondents argued that gender equality in leadership roles was important as a demonstration of the equal capacities of men and women. Several interviewees, for instance, emphasized that women have 'the same intellectual capacities to do whatever a man can do' and need a chance 'to show themselves.' [1AlumF] According to one participant, 'there is really no difference between men and women in terms of capacities and competencies' and so increasing the number of women in leadership is really a matter of 'balancing things out' [3AlumF]. [8AlumF] One male respondent argued that women's equality in

leadership was important because 'women can do things as well as men' [8ExtM].

Female leaders in the humanitarian system are widely seen as being better advocates for the most affected communities, including children and women. One male interviewee believed, for instance, that women use their emotional intelligence to relate to affected populations who are largely made up of women and children [9ExtM]. Female leaders were widely considered to have more 'empathy' and 'humanity,' and a particular ability to 'quickly understand' and prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups, including the needs for gender-responsive programming. Several respondents made this argument, suggesting that female leaders are more effective at prioritising the 'most targeted for action' in a humanitarian or crisis response: as one male respondent suggested, women 'will almost certainly have a different perspective' that can help bring attention to areas 'that might escape the attention of men.' Others shared this view:

*'Firstly, most humanitarian problems are about directly addressing issues for women and children. So, from this point of view, it's already a demographic issue that females make up most of those targeted for action. And they will certainly have a vision, a slightly more, more different vision...'* [9ExtM]

A female survey respondent reiterated this perspective:

*'So, as a whole, I think [women are] important in these positions to prompt and drive things that don't necessarily exist, to point out things that aren't working, things [...] that aren't being put in place to protect women and children, young girls.'* [17ExtF]

A specific programming area in which women were seen as more effective is the provision and prioritisation of prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). Multiple female participants argued that women prioritise protection issues and PSEA in the provision of humanitarian and crisis programming. They argued for instance that while men can and do understand protection issues, women are 'more onto this' and more likely 'to identify what is missing' and 'to drive' implementation of measures to protect women, children and young girls. One female participant stated that women can be more relied upon 'to be fair' and 'proper' in this regard, and to take up accusations of sexual exploitation,



abuse or harassment, whereas ‘there are certain men who seek to protect men’ instead of seeking justice [9AlumF]. Others believe that female leaders in the field help reassure vulnerable communities, who ‘see in us women less risk of exploitation than in a man’ (5KIIF). Several male participants also believed that ‘having women in teams could really help increase respect for PSEA principles’ [11ExtM].

Women are also seen to have specific capacities in conflict resolution, though this belief is at times predicated on gendered norms. When asked why he believed women have unique capacities for conflict resolution, one male participant said women are ‘a bit peaceful’ because they give life and ‘bring men into the world,’ and that women have a capacity ‘to soothe and calm things down’. Other male and female participants, however, believed women ‘manage with more diplomacy than men’ and have a better capacity ‘to listen’ and have more ‘empathy’ and ‘tact’ in their communication. For one female participant, female leaders have a communication style that is ‘more appropriate’ and better ‘adapted’ to the person or context. Some female participants believed women have more ‘subtlety’ and aptitude and for quickly building connections and bringing people together, to communicate and influence, including putting people at ease [1AlumF, 16ExtF].

Female leaders were also viewed as being better at bringing a gender lens to humanitarian organisation themselves, not just affected populations and programming. For instance, women leaders are perceived to understand the unique challenges that other women face in the workforce, an empathetic capacity which makes them more ‘sensitive’ and responsive to women’s challenges. In one example, one female participant (13AlumF) described having to advocate to employ a young female candidate who was pregnant, because she saw ‘enormous potential’ in the woman, while her male colleagues saw a ‘problem’ and didn’t want to proceed with the recruitment. Explaining her actions, this respondent said that ‘if someone rejects me for a role because I am pregnant, I would find that unjust,’ so she ‘automatically’ fought to protect the female recruit from gender-based discrimination. Another female participant who had experienced discrimination describes ‘mak[ing] it a priority to hire women and give women greater opportunities,’ while a third female respondent believed that having more women in leadership roles meant ‘there is less risk of abuse of staff’ [3AlumF] within organisations.

Related to their perceived capacity to understand women’s rights and needs is the suggestion that female leaders provide different views and can bring a new ‘way of understanding certain situations’ that complement those of men. For female participants, for instance, diversity is often seen as important for bringing greater ‘synergy’ and completeness of perspectives to help address issues, especially given women make up over half of the world’s population. More importantly, according to one participant, combining the knowledge and competencies of men and women ‘can produce something richer that could have a better impact’ [12AlumF]. Another female respondent highlighted that having a diversity of leaders—men and women, who bring different skills and knowledge—improves the quality of the overall impact of the humanitarian response:

*‘Women have their own way of leading and managing, they have skills and they have knowledge. So do men. And I think that by putting the two together, that can create something more enriching that will help to have a greater impact.’ [12AlumF]*

Both men and women reported gender-essentialising views on women and leadership, but with different implications. Several male and female participants (n=6) viewed female leaders as ‘more rigorous in their work,’ including being more ‘attentive,’ thorough and detailed, leading to ‘more satisfying results’ and an ability to get to know a context and find the necessary ‘means [and] strategies.’ According to one particular participant, female leaders are also ‘a lot more careful’ and attentive in the management of resources and are therefore less wasteful [5ExtM]. One female participant [5ExtF] believed women are more likely to be rigorous because they ‘naturally seek to protect things and people’. However, a male participant who believed women got better results indicated this was the case because he had observed that ‘the women in my team were afraid of failure.’

Men were also more likely to speak about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of a ‘leadership féminin,’ and to suggest that ‘female’ strengths relate to possessing ‘maternal instincts’ and ‘feeling[s]’ [7ExtM, 9ExtM]. Male respondents were also more likely to believe that ‘women’ have negative traits or tendencies as leaders. In some cases, for instance, what is perceived as a strength by women is not perceived as a strength—or is attributed to gendered stereotypes—by men. A few male participants, for

instance, believed the decisions of female leaders have an ‘emotional dimension’ (9KIIM) and that women ‘act more with their heart than their head.’ [7ExtM]). Two male participants perceived this as ‘bad’, with one reporting, for instance:

*‘In fact, women at a given moment, act with the heart and not with the head. And that’s where it’s bad.’ [7ExtM]*

Meanwhile, a few female participants believed that by having ‘a bit of heart’ means they ‘put more of themselves’ into what they are doing and don’t just make ‘mathematical’ decisions. They also take into account ‘the moral and mental health’ of their staff through ‘kind leadership’ that doesn’t only focus on results [3AlumF]:

*‘It’s a bit different, because it’s too mathematical with men. It’s like, “OK, we’ve got to do this, we’re going to do that and everything.” But women put a bit more into what they do.’ [6AlumF]*

Men were also more likely than women to conflate ‘equity’ with ‘equality’ in discussions about women’s leadership. One male participant encapsulates this view, arguing that the ‘principle of equity’ meant ensuring men and women are recruited ‘in the same way’, based on their capacities, regardless of gender:

*‘But I believe that, by applying the principle of equity, it is normal for both men and women, if they are recruited on an equal footing, it is normal for women and men to reach positions of responsibility in the same way.’ [10ExtM]*

The problem with assuming that ‘equity’ means treating everyone ‘equally’ is that it overlooks the systemic and structural barriers that affect men and women in different ways. For instance, in general, women in African countries have less educational access and lower attainment outcomes than men, with lifelong professional, economic, political, and psychological consequences. An *equitable* strategy would take these differential and intersectional contexts into account; while an *equal* strategy would be blind to these comparative privileges and challenges, and assume all candidates have the same opportunities and backgrounds.

## 3.2 Perceived barriers to women’s leadership

*‘I can think of three [barriers]: self-conditioning, i.e. the idea that a woman might consider this possibility to be less accessible. Secondly, I can think of the stigma that confuses leadership with the attributes of masculine virility. Finally, I’m thinking of the domestic and family constraints that still weigh too heavily and too often on women, to the detriment of other aspirations to which they could lay claim.’ [Male respondent, survey]*

*‘Men’s unwillingness to be managed by women; Some women’s unwillingness to accept positions of responsibility (lack of confidence); Women’s household responsibilities.’ [Male respondent, survey]*

When asked about the root causes of gender inequality in the system, several key themes emerged from the online survey and interviews with DESLH graduates. As highlighted in the two opening quotations, these barriers are complex, resulting from the individual, organisational, and cultural level, and often compound to be mutually reinforcing. These perceived barriers to women’s leadership are explored below, providing a backdrop to the analysis of the DESLH which follows.

### 3.2.1 Individual

#### Confidence

Both the survey results and interviews highlight that a perceived ‘lack of confidence’ is believed to be a major barrier to women applying for or recognising themselves as leaders. Women report that ‘doubting’, ‘underestimating’ or ‘devaluing’ themselves—both ‘unjustifiably’ and ‘since birth’—prevented them from taking their own leadership potential seriously. This self-doubt and lack of confidence leads women ‘not to dare’ or ‘aspire’ to leadership roles and is considered largely a product of social, cultural, and gendered norms in which women are taught not to speak up and that ‘it is pointless having a go’ or ‘to take risks.’ One female graduate explained this perspective in the following way:

*'... that fear of saying to yourself, 'Am I really going to be able to do this? I think that's also something that stops women from saying yeah, it's true that I've got experience, but we still have this doubt in us saying yeah but well, I don't think I can do this and I think that's something we need to work on and it's more we're going to work on women's confidence'. [4AlumF]*

This perceived 'lack of confidence' was also said to be a barrier by others, who argued that women 'lack' the confidence needed of a 'good' leader, and therefore need to work on themselves. Several male respondents, for instance, reported that women 'under-estimate themselves' or 'lack confidence,' and are therefore their own barrier (survey results). This prevalent perception is problematic. By problematising women's 'confidence,' responsibility is placed on the individual women to change, rather than addressing the systemic and organisational barriers preventing women from identifying themselves, and being recognised, as leaders. A minority of respondents recognised this:

Women also noted that their male peers tend to present more confidently, and that this attribute is valued as a leadership characteristic. Women report having to compete with male colleagues who 'are more sure of themselves' [2AlumF]. Meanwhile, 'potentially, women don't seek out...and try to develop themselves in this sense' [2AlumF], because 'women don't always realise that confidence isn't something that comes naturally, it is something you have to work at' (1AlumM). As such, despite the large perceived role of society in influencing women's lack of confidence to seek a leadership role, participants believe women must play a role themselves in overcoming the socialisation that has influenced them, otherwise, they 'risk posing a handicap to themselves' [16ExtF].

Lack of confidence is perceived as even more of a barrier for women in national NGOs where there has been 'less support' in terms of building awareness of gender equality compared to international NGOs. One female participant has observed that 'a lot more women at the national level see themselves as inferior compared to women at the international level.' [16ExtF].

### 3.2.2 Organisational

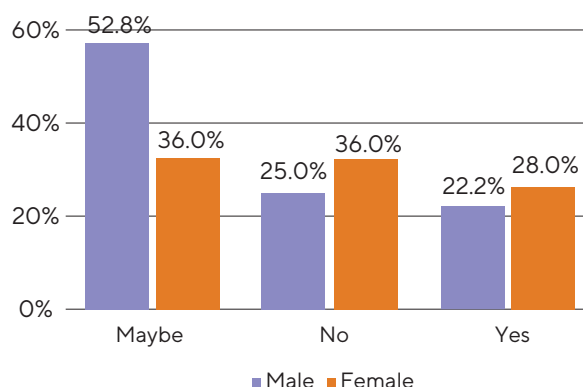
Women in the humanitarian sector face numerous organisational barriers to leadership, particularly in institutions which lack gender equality policies or training.

#### Lack of support for personal context

Men and women both reported a perceived lack of support from humanitarian organisations, with only 28% of women and 22% of men feeling that their organisation supported employees' family responsibilities and personal situations (Figure 5). Given the gendered nature of many family roles, this is a concerning finding for the issue of gender equality in humanitarian leadership across the system, and worthy of consideration for the DESLH specifically.

**Figure 5.** Humanitarian organisations are not seen as supportive of employees' personal situations

Q3.10 - Do you think that humanitarian aid employers understand and account for family responsibilities and personal circumstances of their employees in how they manage their teams?



When interviewed, male and female respondents generally felt they had the support of their colleagues when completing DELSH. However, some female participants said they had to convince their managers to allow them to enrol in DELSH or to attend simulations. Managers reportedly had concerns about ensuring work could be completed in parallel with the course. One female DESLH graduate who is the head of mission in her organisation reports having to justify 'the relevance' of the course to her manager, who wanted to prioritise operations.

Some organisations have discriminatory practices or a lack of policies to prevent gender-based discrimination. Some participants, for instance, described facing or witnessing gender discrimination in their humanitarian organisations. One woman reported being ‘the victim of prejudice’ when applying for a role in conflict settings due to a perception that ‘it isn’t a role for women, it’s too fragile to go into war things’ (3AlumF). Other women reported witnessing discrimination against other women on the grounds of pregnancy or parental status, such as maternity leave.

Several women provided instances of feeling trapped by organisational policies masked as ‘equal opportunities’ but which in reality elided the differential gendered experiences of women in the sector. Some participants, for instance, report facing challenges holding down leadership roles alongside family responsibilities, because their organisations believed ‘equality’ for women is the same as treating them the same as men. In one example, an organisation refused to consider more flexible working hours for a female participant because, reportedly saying, ‘women, you asked for equality’ (16AlumF). In another example, an organisation refused to allow flexible online working arrangements after having done so during COVID, despite the additional pressures women faced at home during lockdowns and through the pandemic [4AlumF].

Given that many women do need to take time out to have children, participants believe organisations can’t just use competencies as their sole recruitment criteria because it makes it almost impossible for women to compete for leadership roles [5AlumF]. Other respondents elaborated the view that humanitarian organisations can create more ‘appropriate conditions’ for women to work in insecure settings, rather than only create positions for men [6AlumF]:

*‘A woman needs to take maternity leave because she has to have children and look after them. That’s the way it is, that’s the way nature is. So, if we base selection criteria solely on competence, we won’t be able to change that because we’ll always find more competent men. It’s true that there are women who fight to make it yes, and so we’re going to find a few who stand out from the*

*crowd. But if we want to bring about change, gender transformation, and ensure that women reach a certain level, we have to base our selection criteria on competence, but we have to base it on something else in addition to competence to be able to make a difference. Otherwise, we won’t succeed.’ [5AlumF]*

The same respondent also observed:

*‘We talk all the time about gender and how we can encourage women to apply. But when it comes to making the selections, there are no criteria other than quality. In other words, at a certain point, men and women are on the same level. There are no preferences, no doubts. You apply. You are told, one, women are encouraged to apply. But when the time comes to make the selection, to choose, there are no advantages to being a woman. Just like that, we choose the best and women aren’t always the best because there are a lot of constraints. Sometimes you’re less well prepared, because you’ve got lots of family things to do, you’ve got to run here to take your child to hospital, so you’re going to be less well prepared than a man facing an interview or a test or whatever. So in the end, the best people are still the men.’ [5AlumF]*

Humanitarian organisations can lack specific provisions to support female leaders and increase their ability to take leadership opportunities. For instance, a lack of family postings (e.g. missions where staff can bring partners and children) reportedly makes it more difficult for women than men to consider international roles, as women more likely to have child-caring responsibilities and are judged negatively by society for living away from their family. Two respondents also reported it is rare for husbands to support their wives undertaking an overseas posting, and that if they do, it may only be for a short period of time [1AlumF, 9AlumM]. In another example, of many, female participants described additional pressures for women in leadership roles when they return from maternity leave but must make additional trips to and from work to home to breastfeed.

Another critical barrier to taking leadership roles is the reported risk of moral and sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse of female staff by members

of their own organisations. Despite the introduction of policies to address this, female participants described a lack of implementation and application which has led to more victims and leaves women continuing to feel unsafe. Female graduates shared examples where their organisational culture makes them feel unsafe when speaking up about incidents and risks. As a result, one woman reported, ‘some women are going to refuse higher level positions because they wonder if they are going to be subjected to indecent propositions’ [8AlumF]:

*‘... in international NGOs, where virtually all international NGOs have policies in place to combat abuse and exploitation. But it’s not enough just to put them in place. You have to make sure that they’re actually implemented. A lot of women in the organisations I’ve worked for, a lot of women have often been victims but don’t dare talk about it because they think it’s just a law, it’s just a policy... Do I feel safe enough to be able to speak out without facing reprisals in terms of my career?’ [8AlumF]*

### 3.2.3 Social, cultural, and gender norms

*‘A woman in a management position has to prove herself twice as much as a man. Her behaviour must be beyond reproach. There must be a lot of pressure.’ [Female survey respondent]*

Alongside the individual and organisation barriers described above, women in francophone countries in Africa report having to overcome significant social, cultural and gender barriers to leadership in the humanitarian sector, particularly related to entrenched norms dictating gender roles and leadership stereotypes.

#### **Leadership is gendered.**

Leadership is seen as a gendered capacity. Numerous responses indicate that gendered perceptions about leadership—what leadership is, what it looks like, and who can embody it—is a systemic barrier to women aspiring to and achieving leadership roles within the humanitarian system. One French female survey respondent who works for an international NGO in Jordan, for instance, highlighted that gendered associations of leadership exclude women not just in the humanitarian system but more widely:

*‘It’s the same as everywhere else, the discrimination associated with leadership that isn’t virile or masculine. Only men are visionaries and can lead teams, women are too meek or, on the contrary, hysterical.’*

The association of ‘leadership’ with masculinity and virility was echoed by another respondent, who said of the main barriers to inclusive leadership: ‘Je pense à la stigmatisation, celle qui confond le leadership avec les attributs de la virilité masculine.’/ ‘I can think of the stigma that confuses leadership with the attributes of masculine virility.’ Similarly, an Italian survey respondent working for an INGO in West Africa also argued that prevalent conceptions of leadership presented a barrier to more inclusive, representative leadership in the humanitarian system:

*‘Poor representation of leadership, for which we tend to prefer people with great self-confidence, who talk a lot and have outgoing personalities.’*

Several participants interviewed reiterated the view that the gendered nature of leadership prevents women from achieving gender equality. Several female respondents from West and Central Africa, for instance, report growing up believing that leadership roles are for men. They therefore ‘have difficulty seeing themselves in certain roles’ and fear the consequences of putting themselves forward for such roles, due to pervasive, negative perceptions of women in leadership. One female participant, for instance, reports having a supervisor who ‘had difficulty believing in the capacities of women’ [16ExtF], even though she was in a head of project role.

Female study participants described numerous occasions where men have had trouble accepting them as a leader and did not respect their authority. Such instances reportedly left these women feeling undermined, ‘denigrated’, ‘stifled’ and blocked from doing their jobs and using their expertise, to the point where one reported feeling ‘forced to quit’ her role. In one example, a female respondent described male colleagues trying to order her to sign poorly prepared documents without review, implying ‘she doesn’t know anything’ [14AlumF]. These same colleagues would also reportedly resist her attempts to correct poor program and financial management

practices. Another female participant described being told off and questioned for speaking up in meetings, despite that being her role. Another third female humanitarian leader reports quitting her role after being deployed by a major international humanitarian organisation to a local chapter where 'they did not listen to my decisions' [3AlumF]. The local chapter representatives had reportedly asked her director, in front of her: 'why have you sent us a women? Me, I have three women at home.' [3AlumF]

Unfortunately, such examples are common, even among more experienced female participants in high level leadership. One such woman said that of women in this position: 'even when you are a leader, you have no value. I have experienced this' [6AlumF]. Another experienced female participant said that to gain acceptance, it doesn't necessarily require 'more effort' on behalf of women, but it does require 'patience,' good communication, and engagement. A male respondent indicated this misogynistic view of women in leadership roles was not isolated to men, but that when women were seen 'to be above men' there is a tendency even among women, not to respect them, but also to 'put them down' [10AlumM]. Perceptions about the gendered nature of leadership is an important finding, as such perspectives indicate that addressing gender imbalances is not simply a matter of targeting and training women, but of engaging with the entire system in which humanitarian leadership occurs.

Compounding gendered definitions of leadership is the fact that gendered norms portray women as 'weak,' 'fragile,' or other characteristics which debar from them conforming to pervasive stereotypes about what leaders look like. Embedded in these stereotypes, for instance, is the assumption that women of a certain age will fall pregnant and needing protection, which leads to discrimination against women and fewer women being selected for humanitarian jobs. This, in turn, leads to fewer women with the experience and motivation to apply for leadership development opportunities and roles:

*'Before, they were reluctant to recruit women because they said that, with motherhood, the woman who is going to get pregnant, with maternity leave, [they] might find that it was a financial loss to recruit a woman'* [2AlumM]

### **Humanitarian work is gendered.**

Like leadership, the humanitarian system is often perceived as gendered, which presents another barrier to gender equality in organisations and across the system. Interviewees argued that humanitarian work in West and Central Africa is gendered and not considered 'appropriate' for women. One female interviewee explained, for instance, the humanitarian work often takes place in difficult, dangerous, and volatile settings and is therefore considered 'not a role for women' [3AlumF]. A second male respondent elaborated on this view:

*'...the perception in the humanitarian world is that it's really a man's job. People define it as a male job. And why is that? Because most of the humanitarian work you see is in conflict zones, in crisis zones. So, there's already a problem of exposure. Women, even if they wanted to go and put themselves at risk, also get promoted, take the risks. But you see, our society doesn't give them much credit, we think it's too dangerous. You see, women are seen as fragile beings who shouldn't be too exposed to risk. We think that men can be more exposed than women. That's the first thing. Then there's the second element, you see, with field missions, even if you're in a city, you'll have field missions that sometimes require you to go out on motorbikes, sometimes on roads that are a bit rough, a bit dangerous.'* [2AlumM]

Female DESLH graduates from the focus group discussions shed more light on this challenge, highlighting that of the minority of women in West and Central Africa who do reach higher education, most chose 'female' professions that are compatible with family life. Humanitarian aid, these groups agreed, is not perceived to be a family friendly or 'female profession' in the West and Central African context.

### **Family roles are gendered.**

Related to the gendered perceptions about humanitarian work and who can lead it, gendered norms within family structures play a major role in preventing women from applying for leadership positions and development opportunities. The

sense of being overwhelmed and time-poor was a recurrent observation among women with families, and a major barrier to them having the time, energy, or support to prioritise their own careers or professional development. One focus group discussion participant summed up her group's view on the issue of women's domestic workload in comparison to men :

*'Generally speaking, when women leave work, they have to take care of the house, the kitchen and so on. I'll put it this way, when she leaves work and goes home, she has to look after the housework, cooking and all that. And even to look at the WhatsApp groups she's in, she may not have time to look. On the other hand, a man who may be leaving work and arriving home, if he's not watching his TV, he's got his phone in his hand. And during this time, if news passes through these groups or there is this type of useful information, he will have gotten it and it will bypass the women who have left their phone aside. [A woman] doesn't have time to look at these groups where she can get good information because she's overloaded. So these are all interrelated obstacles.'* [FGD]

Numerous survey respondents shared this view, with one male respondent observing that the main barrier to women achieving leadership roles is 'the responsibilities of women in the home in relation to the regular tasks required by their jobs' [Male survey respondent]. The observation that women have a higher domestic workload, and therefore feel too overworked or demotivated to extend themselves without being able to rely on support was shared by focus groups and interviewees. This is a highly gendered phenomenon. Several interview respondents reported that the prevailing belief where they live is that women are educated 'to become someone's wife and a mother' [3KIIF] and that their place is in the home and 'the kitchen.' This domestic burden has implications for women's motivations and energy when it comes to assuming additional roles or duties at work. Respondents feel, for instance, that they 'already work a lot' [14AlumF] and that 'with a leadership role, they won't have enough time for their family' [10ExtM]. Given social and cultural expectations that the women are the primary carers within the domestic space, there is also pressure on women 'not to affect their family'

by taking on additional responsibilities or personal studies. [14AlumF] Men, on the other hand, are reported to have 'less constraints' than women when it comes to taking leadership roles, including humanitarian expatriate roles.

There was also a perception among respondents that women often need first to convince or receive 'permission' from their husbands or families, before putting themselves forward for additional leadership roles or training:

*'I think that if the woman herself is convinced of her position, she will succeed in convincing her husband because [if] the woman herself is not very sure, she lets herself be dominated. And then she doesn't dare move forward.'* [3AlumF]

In terms of support to help graduates complete DELSH, single women (with and without children) tended to need greater assistance than others to help them with family responsibilities. This included getting family members to help or to hire outside help.

*'... the other challenge of how to reconcile my family life with this training course... Before starting the week, and that was challenging, because at some point you have to go home to family on the weekend, and you come home at the weekend, and you're concentrating on your course while the whole week you're away from your family. You've got to get the house ready, you've got to do this and that. So, I was really worried about these things. But I was able to find alternatives. I found someone to help me with the housework. I also had the support of my mum, who is now retired.'* [15AlumF]

In contrast to this, male participants were mostly concerned about work and study, and typically enjoyed family support. Fewer men had such doubts and considered further training as a normal part of the 'trajectory' and 'career development' of them as men and as 'head[s] of family.' The training was viewed as part of 'men's development' and as an achievement. As such, male participants did not share the same level of doubt and concern about the ability to take on DELSH as the female graduates.

## Age

Related to the issue of gendered family norms, focus group discussions highlighted that age can play a role in women not having equal opportunities to access leadership roles and leadership development opportunities. Women are trapped in a cycle of competing family and professional pressures: in their 20s and 30s, for many women priority is given to the home, and not their careers. As a result, when women do eventually have time to search for a leadership position, they are older and comparatively less professional experience, which makes it harder for them to meet the criteria for more senior, decision-making roles.

## Educational access and attainment

Another key social and cultural barrier for women is the systemic comparative lack of educational attainment and opportunities for girls and women from a young age in many West and Central African countries. Women report being discouraged since childhood, from persevering with their education or participating in professional training. As one participant reported: 'parents tend to focus more on the education of the boy' (16AlumF), with lifelong consequences for girls and women. Women therefore on average have fewer formal qualifications than men, which makes it harder for women to compete for jobs and less likely women will reach a leadership level role. One female graduate highlighted how later-life professional and economic opportunities for women is rooted in earlier educational inequality for girls:

*'... if we take fewer women into law schools or in schools for social science studies and training and so on, this will also have an impact on those who have access to leadership positions. So, for me, education is really the foundation.'* [8AlumF]

This perspective was shared by another male graduate:

*'... there are a lot of women who haven't advanced enough in their studies, which means that on the job market, they're not very competitive compared to men who have advanced degrees.'* [2AlumM]

How this lack of comparative educational opportunity impacted DESLH female candidates is explored further below.

## Level of English

Related to the comparative lack of educational opportunity and attainment, women report having a lower overall standard of English, which is seen as an acute barrier to leadership roles in the humanitarian sector. English is considered 'essential' for leadership roles, with one female participant reporting:

*'Women in French-speaking countries do not have a good level of English, which is a real barrier, an obstacle to top management positions in the country..... I would already have a position as country manager or deputy manager in another country, but since I didn't have a good command of English, I'm kind of stuck.'* [1AlumF]

Men are seen as having more time to learn and practice English, which helps them access leadership opportunities.

## 3.3 Strategies for overcoming the perceived barriers to women's leadership

Survey respondents were asked for their recommendations for the interventions and strategies for overcoming the major barriers to women's leadership in the humanitarian system. Major areas of interventions reported include:

- Education, development, and training
- Quotas and positive discrimination
- Legislation and system-level policies
- 'Do no harm' principles
- Engaging with donors, humanitarian organisations, and the wider system

For a full write up of these findings, please see Annex 2 below.

As with the major barriers, many of the perceived interventions for improving women's leadership are



systems-level, and beyond the scope of an individual program or institution.

Leadership development, however, was among the most frequently cited interventions or strategies for increasing the number of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Respondents believed that training—‘la formation’—and development opportunities could help women improve their confidence (a reported barrier to women’s

leadership), and well as improving their knowledge, skills, and practices.

The remainder of this report uses this contextual information to frame, therefore, a more specific focus on the DESLH, including why so few women apply to the course, and what can be done to increase the number of women in the programme in future cohorts.

# 4. APPLICATIONS AND ENROLMENTS: GENDER AND THE DESLH

*‘Recruitment policies must be established to encourage women to apply, women must be trained in emergency and humanitarian work, and women who are already involved in humanitarian work must be made visible.’*  
[Female survey respondent]

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter uses the system-wide findings reported above—on the support for, barriers to, and strategies for improving women’s representation in leadership roles in the humanitarian system—as the backdrop for evaluating what we know about women’s applications and enrolments in the DESLH.

Consistent with the gender barriers in the wider system reported above, there is a persistent gender imbalance between the number of men and women enrolling in the DESLH. This chapter aims to interrogate this fact by examining what we know specially about the DESLH in relation to:

- Recruitment and marketing
- Selection criteria and admissions
- Funding and scholarships
- Withdrawals and graduation
- Success rates and learning outcomes

## 4.2 Recruitment and marketing

A key challenge for achieving gender parity in the DESLH arises from challenges in marketing and recruitment. There is a strong perception among female graduates that CHL could strategically improve how it markets information about the DESLH for female candidates in West and Central Africa. At one level, there is simply the perception that information about the DESLH is hard to find. As one focus group respondent reported:

*‘But I wanted to point out the lack of information, because I’ve been working in the humanitarian sector for several years now, and I have to admit that it was only last year that I found out about this diploma. It was my line manager who had to tell me about this diploma and encourage me to enrol. So the lack of information is crucial, because if you don’t know that it already exists, you can’t enrol.’* [FGD]

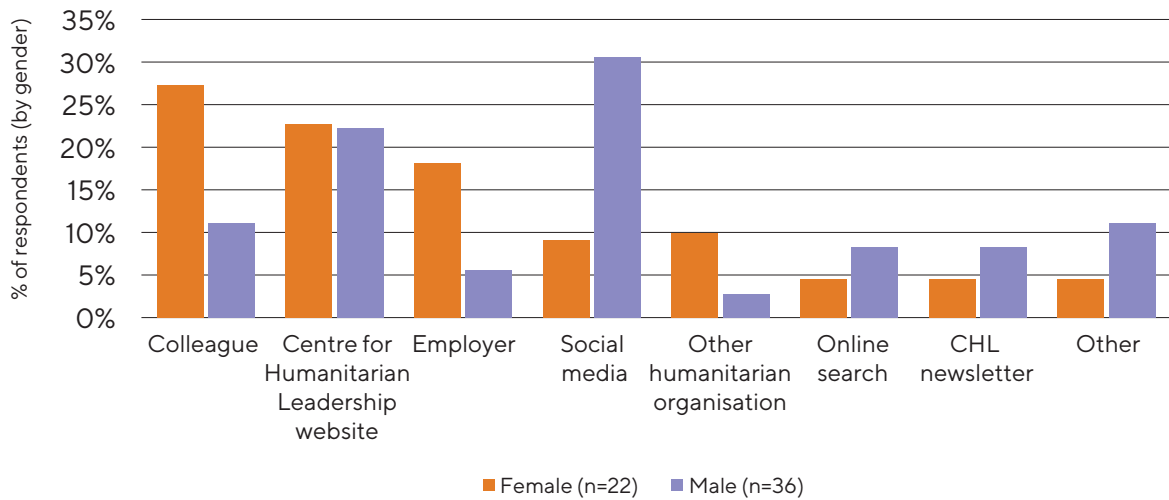
There are more specific concerns, however, that the marketing channels through which the DESLH is publicised are not optimised to reach local and national-level women in West and Central Africa. Several women were concerned, for instance, that information about the DESLH is primarily shared at the upper echelons of humanitarian organisations, which in West and Central Africa are typically dominated by men. As a result, participants warned, information about the DESLH is shared largely among ‘men’s networks,’ to the implicit exclusion of women.

Women are also reportedly significantly less likely to have spare time to use the social media platforms such as LinkedIn and are therefore missing out on key marketing information about the course. This observation relates to the above discussion about women feeling overwhelmed and overloaded with domestic as well as professional duties, with little spare time. Interviews with DESLH graduates indicate that women—particularly those working in local and national NGOs in West and Central Africa—are less likely to use social media than men, owing to work overload and a lack of spare time. As a result, women are not exposed to key marketing channels for the DESLH.

This finding is corroborated by the DESLH gender and leadership survey, which was disseminated primarily through LinkedIn. First, of the 41 female survey respondents who provided information on the type of employer, only 3 (7.32%) work in local or national NGOs, compared to 19 (46.34%) who

**Figure 6.** Women are hearing about the DESLH through colleagues, the CHL website, and employers

Q4.2 Where did you hear about the DESLH? (n=58)



report working at international NGOs, and 7 (17.07%) at the UN. When triangulated with interview data, this finding suggests not that there are more women in these international roles, but that women in local and national organisations are not necessarily responding to LinkedIn surveys.

A second indication that social media may not be the optimal channel for accessing women in West and Central Africa comes from a survey item which asks explicitly how respondents heard about the DESLH. Although from a relatively small sample (n=58), results indicate that men are significantly more likely to have heard about the DESLH through social media, while women are mostly hearing about the course from colleagues (27%), the CHL website (23%), or their employers (18%) (Figure 6).

As seen above, the CHL website is a key channel through which Francophone women are hearing about the DESLH (Figure 7). In August 2023, the CHL website was launched as a fully bi-lingual site for the first time. The fact the website is now in French will hopefully increase the number of Francophone women who can access information about the DESLH and other humanitarian leadership courses. It will also improve the ability for women to share this information among Francophone colleagues.

Female graduates made several suggestions for how CHL could more strategically target women, and particularly women from local and national

organisations in West and Central Africa, in the marketing for the DESLH. Suggestions include:

- Advertise within West and Central African NGO and humanitarian organisations and forums directly, asking them to encourage female staff to apply;
- Showcase women in DESLH marketing posters and videos (especially the video about sharing experiences and career opportunities), and distribute profiles of female graduates of the course
- Suggest that female alumni pass on the recruitment message and encourage their female colleagues to apply;
- Acknowledge openly that the course is intensive and may be difficult for participants who have family responsibilities, but assure applicants that they will be supported.

One recurrent suggestion was for CHL to identify and disseminate information through national and local women's humanitarian networks, including formal networks but also less formal social networks such as self-organised WhatsApp groups. In a separate online survey, launched by CHL to inform the recruitment of the seventh DESLH cohort, female graduates were asked if they belong to any women's networks or forums which could be used to share information about the DESLH.<sup>8</sup> Suggestions included, for instance:

<sup>8</sup> NB: These results are from a separate survey distributed to female graduates prior to the recruitment for Cohort 7 of the DESLH, with the explicit intention of increasing the proportion of female applicants through using identified channels.

- L'Association des Femmes Juristes de Côte d'Ivoire (AFJCI)
- Plan International's Women's Forum
- Le Forum des Organisations Internationales au Mali (FONGIM)
- 100% Entre Femme (WhatsApp group)
- Humanitarian Women's Network (HWN)
- La 7<sup>ème</sup> Promotion MSG de l'Université de Bouaké La Neuve (Facebook group)

for CHL to consider engaging more directly with local and national organisations in West and Central Africa, to try to encourage applications from female candidates in particular.

The recommendation for CHL to engage more directly with local and national organisations reflects another finding from the survey, which indicates that organisational support—or a perceived lack thereof—can be a barrier to applications for the DESLH. Female respondents were slightly more likely than men to believe that their employers would support their application for the DESLH (58% of women compared to 53% men replying 'yes'), however 13% women and 30% men replied that they did not think their organisation would support their application for the program. When these results are disaggregated by the type of organisation that respondents are employed by, a significant majority of people working at local and national NGOs believed they would be supported, compared to those working at international NGOs (Figure 7).

This finding is worth highlighting, as it suggests that while a perceived lack of organisational support for enrolling in the DESLH may be translating into lower applications particularly from civil society organisations, local and national NGO staff do feel that their organisations would be supportive of their application to the course. There is scope, therefore,

### Leadership is not a title: an opportunity for DESLH recruitment and marketing

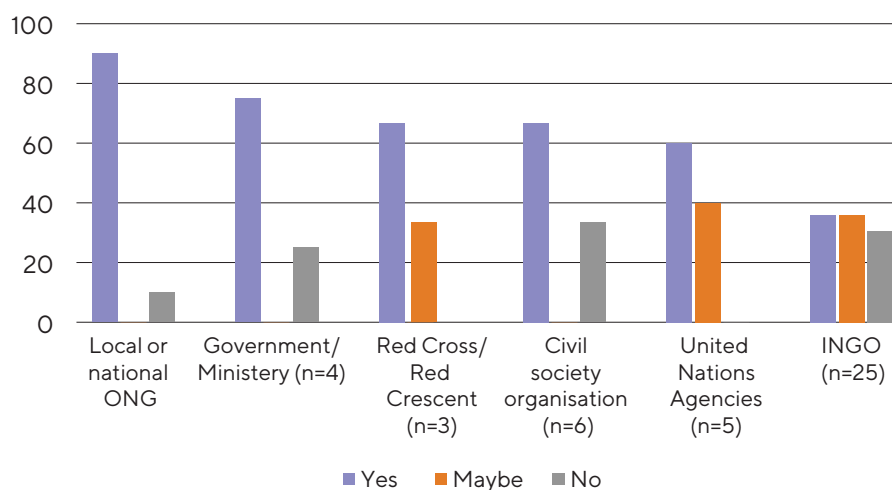
Leadership is not a title: an opportunity for DESLH recruitment and marketing

Focus group discussions conducted for this study highlighted that how 'leadership' is defined and understood by local and national organisations can present an implicit barrier to women participating in the DESLH. In conversation, female DESLH graduates explained, for instance, that if an organization defines leadership simply as 'positions of responsibility', these organisations tend to overlook female employees who may be in 'lower' positions but who nonetheless have significant potential to contribute and evolve as leaders in their fields. These women may not fit the explicit DESLH criteria (or perceived criteria for 'leadership'), and therefore won't be encouraged by their organizations to apply.

This is an important finding for the context of a leadership program predicated on the belief that leadership is not a title or a corner office, but a behaviour and potential that is agnostic of official roles.

This finding also highlights a challenge for the DESLH. If CHL is committed to the principle that leadership is a behaviour that is not reducible to a position of responsibility, then recruitment and marketing must reflect this, in terms of how the DESLH is marketed and communicated to local and national organisation, and the wider system.

**Figure 7.** Most local NGO respondents believed their organisations would support their application Q5.6 - Do you think your employer would support you in your application for this course?



### 4.3 Selection criteria and admissions

*'So the [Centre for Humanitarian Leadership] needs to work with organisations to help them understand the criteria, because there is also a poor understanding of [these criteria]. We need to highlight the qualities that people have in their CVs. If you work well on your CV, you can take part in humanitarian leadership training without being in charge of humanitarian programmes, but perhaps just as a field project or group leader.'* [Female DESLH graduate, Focus Group Discussion]

A second key area when it comes to analyzing the gender imbalance in the DESLH to date are the selection criteria—and perceptions about these criteria—by which admissions processes are guided. Responses from interview and focus group participants highlight how some of the barriers introduced above—such as confidence, gendered conceptualizations of leadership and humanitarian work, and a lack of comparative educational and professional opportunities for women—are playing out in how potential female applicants are conceptualizing their own candidacy and chances of being accepted into the DESLH.

#### **Confidence and 'imposter syndrome'**

More women than men expressed doubts about whether they would be accepted into the DESLH program, based on the stated selection criteria. There is a perception among respondents that the DESLH is a competitive program: female and male respondents both shared the perception that selection to the course is competitive due to a high volume of applications and stringent selection criteria. Compared to female respondents, however, more male interviewees believe they had *'a good CV' with relevant experience and are qualified for admission*. While several female graduates felt confident, over a third of female graduates interviewed (n=6) expressed doubts about their chances of being selected. These doubts included whether they had enough experience in their leadership role and within the humanitarian system.

Related to these doubts, female graduates revealed a degree of 'imposter syndrome,' with interviews revealing women felt the need to justify their presence on the course to their peers, who they

presumed to be more worthy or legitimate. One female graduate (who met the selection criteria and has since graduated from the DESLH) revealed this sense of imposter syndrome in the following terms:

*'Throughout the course, I used to tell my peers that I'd never had 100% humanitarian experience, I'd never seen it, because I discovered humanitarian law when I was still a student. But most of the projects I've personally managed have been development projects. So for me, this was my first experience with this project to combat violent extremism, where we see displaced people and other situations.... So, profiles in the strict sense of the word, I'd say that if they only took people with real humanitarian experience, maybe I wouldn't be selected.'* [15AlumF]

In other cases, despite having direct experience in humanitarian settings, female graduates believed the DESLH might be targeting people 'really in the humanitarian space,' and that one year's experience might not be enough. Even having at least three years prior experience in a conflict setting several years ago didn't seem 'gripping experience' for one graduate now working in development. These revealed anxieties about having 'enough' or the 'right kind' of experience—even among DESLH graduates—indicates there is scope for the CHL to concentrate on communicating who the DESLH is for, and that once accepted, all participants have valid and useful knowledge and experience to share with their cohort.

There are nonetheless positive indications that CHL's current marketing and communications in ensuring women are welcome and encouraged to apply is hitting the mark. One woman who reported being confident she met the DESLH selection criteria, for instance, said she felt more confident knowing that 'women are encouraged to apply [2AlumF]. Another female graduate-- who had not felt confident owing to the perception the DESLH was very competitive—nonetheless felt that the fact there are few women at higher levels who aspire to this type of training would work in her favour:

*'...maybe, as there [aren't] necessarily many women in leadership positions or many women who aspire to this type of training, maybe my application really would be accepted.'* [8AlumF]

Another female graduate noted that she felt emboldened by the fact that ‘women in leadership’ is receiving more attention and momentum across a range of sectors and settings:

*‘Yes, I said to myself that we are in a dynamic of encouraging female leadership. This is a time, a movement to encourage female leadership. So, I think I was positive about my application being accepted.’ [13AlumF]*

#### **Too few women at senior levels**

A prevailing view among respondents is that the gender imbalance in the DESLH is a direct reflection of the underrepresentation of women in senior positions in the humanitarian system: there are not enough women, in other words, who meet the DESLH criteria. Multiple respondents reported that there are not enough women in ‘top management,’ due to having fewer educational and professional opportunities compared to men, resulting in a smaller pool of qualified women compared to men. The following observation was made by a female alumna:

*‘... The DELSH selects more top management to take part in this training. And generally at top management level, [there are] not enough women ... women are rare. So if we wanted to increase the number of women, we’d have to see how to recruit women who are below top management level, because generally we don’t have enough women compared to men.’ [1AlumF]*

This view was shared by another female respondent:

*‘And at this level, as I was saying to the managers, in the SMT, Senior Management Team and then on the Junior Management Team. But it’s precisely at this level that we realise that there are fewer women. So, of course, there’s less women. I have the example of a [major INGO], but I imagine that in other organisations it must be the same. That’s why we’re going to see that only men apply, because they’re the ones at this level and they’re the ones to whom we’re giving the opportunity. Are we extending the opportunity to participate in the DESLH to lower levels of the governance hierarchy of our organisations? Maybe at that level, if we do it, it will increase the number of people applying for the DESLH, that’s for sure.’ [5AlumF]*

One focus group discussion participant described the lack of women in the DESLH as a direct reflection of the ‘pyramid’ structure of gender and power in the humanitarian system generally. In other words, most women work at the bottom of the professional hierarchy, and not in the top in ‘decision-making positions’:

*‘So, there’s a whole group of women too who might not have access to these opportunities. It’s true that the work overload will come up. It’s true that the criteria will come up. Why will they come up? Because it’s like a pyramid. Most women in humanitarian action are not in decision-making positions, so if they are assistants, for example, you will see that they will be disregarded.’ [Female DESLH graduate, Focus Group Discussion]*

This ‘pyramid’ structure describes the skewed gender ratio in the humanitarian system, with most women working in less senior roles, and fewer at the top.

The absence of senior female leaders relates to another finding about the desire for female mentors and networks within the DESLH. According to participants, fewer women aspire to leadership roles than men due to many factors, compounded by a lack of female role models in senior leadership positions. Female participants also had concerns about how they would cope with study on top of other commitments. Participants suggested that providing access to female role models will help inspire, motivate and instill greater confidence in other women about pursuing leadership opportunities.

One way for DELSH to support female role models may therefore be to foster the creation of a ‘cohort godmother or godfather,’ who can support female candidates and participants through the process. Graduates believed that there is further scope to increase the number of women playing this role. DELSH could also provide interested female leaders with an opportunity to discuss their concerns in a safe space, preferably with alumni who can serve as role models. There is also scope to increase the visibility of female graduates and their challenges and achievements in CHL communications through, for instance, profiles or case studies focusing on female DESLH graduates and their work as humanitarian leaders.

### Comparative educational disadvantage

Male and female graduates are also calling for recognition of the systemic comparative lack of educational opportunities and attainment for women in Central and West Africa, in the selection and admissions processes for the DESLH. Female graduates in the focus groups emphasised that women have significantly less access to university in their home countries.

This educational disadvantage is contributing to comparatively fewer women in senior leadership positions and levels of responsibility generally: respondents called for this inequality to be taken into account in admissions and selection processes:

*‘There are women who have remained at the level of field official, at managerial level in the field, who have managed in humanitarian response, who really know humanitarian issues, but their level prevents them from applying for this course. I think that many women will be able to apply because, if I take the example of the sub-region and even Africa, the level of schooling among women is very low and the rate of women obtaining higher qualifications is also very low. So, it’s all these factors that mean that women don’t manage to meet all the criteria required to gain access to this diploma course.’ [5AlumM]*

Several female candidates felt insecure about their own abilities to perform in an academic setting. Many expressed anxiety, for instance, about learning in a higher education setting because they had never been to university and felt ‘very intimidated’ at the thought of being alongside others with more experience, including younger people with medical degrees. One female graduate said of her own experience:

*‘I was very apprehensive, because it’s a university course and I’d never studied at university before. I trained as a midwife. So it was really on the job that I started to build up, train and all that. But enrolling at a university, this was my first time. So I was very apprehensive, because there are young people with PhDs who have diplomas. I was very intimidated’. [3AlumF]*

The same female graduate reported that although she otherwise felt confident in speaking to groups, she was unsure if she could hold her own specifically in ‘debating ideas’ in an academic setting:

*‘It was really the unknown. I don’t know the other people taking part ... I said it was perhaps a lack of confidence because it was new, the university study, that’s what it was. I’m not shy, not at all. I’m confident when I’m in front of people and that sort of thing. But during this course, at the beginning, frankly, I lost my nerve because I was afraid to face the university world with its debates and ideas. That’s the university way, which I didn’t know.’ [3AlumF]*

Another female graduate was concerned how she ‘would cope’ after having not studied for many years:

*‘I did have another fear, though, and that was I felt it was an academic course and quite specialised. And, for me, it had been about ten years since I’d last gone back to school as such. Going back to do training courses, having to produce, seeing all that. [...] It’s that fear of, ‘Will I be able to cope in terms of my abilities?’ [8AlumF]*

None of the male DESLH graduates interviewed for this study expressed comparable concerns about their own educational level or ability to study in a higher education setting. Further research is needed to probe this finding, and potentially to draw attention to this educational disparity within future DESLH cohorts.

## 4.4 Funding and scholarships

*‘When you look at the standard of living in communities where people barely have a decent income to support themselves and their families, which are generally very large, it’s hard to say that you’re going to put aside funds to be able to study.’ [Female DESLH graduate, Focus Group Discussion]*

In 2020, CHL increased targeted financial assistance for female students of the DESLH as an intervention for improving access for women. By Cohorts 5

and 6, nearly all female participants received a scholarship to attend the DESLH, with an absolute increase in the number of women from cohorts 5, and 6 (Figure 1). While there is insufficient data to demonstrate causally if this financial intervention increased the number of female applicants (owing to sample size and limitations in data collection), it is logical to assume that receiving bursaries helped women to complete the course, given qualitative data indicating financial barriers are a challenge for several female participants

While money alone will not lead to gender equality in this course, funding and scholarships are an important lever the Centre can control to mitigate a known barrier for women: financial pressures and lack of access to discretionary funds for professional development. Costs associated not only with enrolling in the course but making childcare provisions while studying are an explicit stated barrier for women with low incomes. As the opening quotation to this section indicates, many of the women applying for the DESLH come from contexts where they have low discretionary spending for professional development, little control over family budgets, and little recourse to other funds to cover such expenses.

Such financial barriers may also affect men. However, focus groups with DESLH graduates highlighted that women face comparative financial disadvantage for several reasons. First, men typically earn more than women in their primary employment; second, men typically have more spare time to take on consultancies alongside their primary jobs, to supplement their primary incomes; and third, men typically have more control over family budgets and less resistance to using those funds for professional development opportunities. Several focus group discussion participants agreed that is often difficult for women to convince their husbands to use family budgets for their professional development.

Women experience financial pressures differently, however, depending on their personal and professional contexts. One female interviewee suggested, for instance, there is not a shortage of women in senior positions, but that most of these women are unmarried and would be 'happy' to undertake additional courses like the DESLH if it were fully funded:

*'If they're interested, I think that the issue for staff is more to do with payment and funding. What has happened in most humanitarian organisations is that most of the women everywhere in top management are not married. These are the women, the single women, who are still available and most of the time available for work-related training. So, I think that's the obstacle, and it's more to do with funding. If it's funded, they'll be happy to do it. [1AlumF]*

While this perspective is contrary to the consensus, it does encourage a consideration of a particular group—unmarried women—in this analysis. Marital status is not per se a barrier to participant in the DESLH, but it does raise the question of whether single women are better represented in leadership roles relative to married women, and the implications for the DESLH in terms of strategies for inclusion.

Women who do have family responsibilities have repeatedly highlighted that financial pressures come not just from course fees, but from costs associated with engaging child-minding services to enable them to focus on their studies, either online or in-person (see the accompanying Online and In-Person modalities study for more information). Several female respondents called for more radical funding to cover the cost of babysitters or additional support to free their time up to concentrate on their studies.

Finally, women working at the international level report their own financial pressures. In general, local and national organisations tend to have smaller budgets and fewer resources for professional development. This logic is embedded in the DELSH fee structure, which aims to subsidize local and national participants, particularly women. A female graduate from an international NGO, however, argued that this preferential system—where funding is channeled to local and national NGOs rather than INGOs, on the presumption the latter can afford to support professional development—restricts access to financial support for women in INGOs who do not necessarily have recourse to subsidies or funds from their organizations [14AlumF].

To further determine the impact that funding and scholarships has on women's access and completion in the DESLH, a dedicated monitoring, evaluation, and research study needs to be undertaken.



## Does gender impact student choice of online or residential learning?

Balancing studies with workload and family responsibilities presents a major and consequential challenge for students with children and caring responsibilities. A common assumption is that online learning may therefore provide flexibility for these people, and can increase particularly women's participation in formal learning programs. The online intensive aims to facilitate access to DESLH, including for women who cannot leave their children and families for the 8-day residential intensives.

However, this assumption has been complicated by findings for this study, which highlight that being overworked and responsible for parenting and household chores as well as professional duties is a major barrier both in-person and online for many participants—primarily women—with children. Women in particular report having to help with cooking, homework, and other chores while trying to engage online. Further, when given a choice, roughly equivalent numbers of women in Cohort 6 opted for the residential Unit 4 intensive as online, with a larger proportion opting for in-person overall:

- **Residential:** 35 students enrolled, incl. 9 women (e.g. 25.7% of residential participants) and 26 men (74.3%)
- **Online:** 26 students enrolled, incl. 7 women (26.9%), 1 non-binary (3.8%) and 18 men (69.2%)

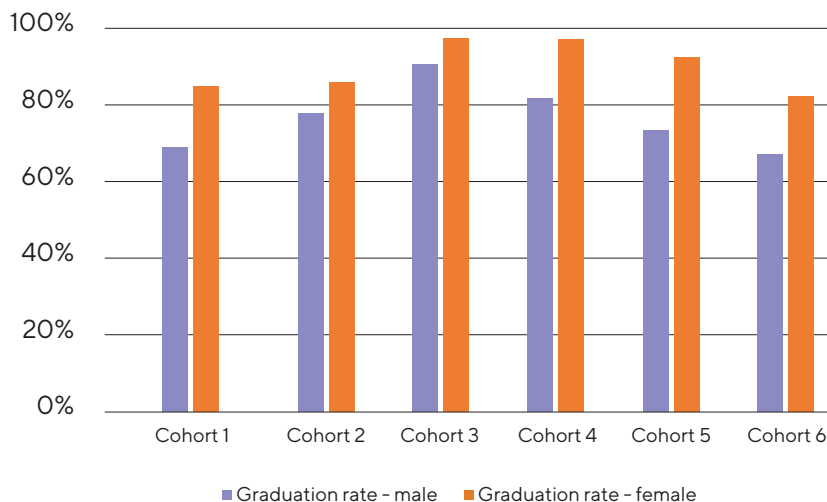
These breakdowns—while too small to be statistically significant—do indicate the need to be cautious around making assumptions that online is preferred or improves access for different groups of students. Ensuring all students are equipped and resourced to make the choice that best suits their learning and personal contexts is important. Please see the online and residential intensives study for more.

## 4.5 Graduation rates

Overall, women graduated at higher rates than their male peers (Figure 11). The first 6 cohorts of the DESLH have an aggregate graduation rate of 76% for men (181 enrolled, with 138 graduating) and 92% for women (with 76 enrolled, and 70 graduating). In Cohorts 3 and 4, 100% of female students graduated from the DESLH.

This 100% female graduation rate is an outstanding result both within the context of the DESLH and comparatively across other graduate diplomas. For comparison, the Faculty success rate at Deakin University is on average between 86% and 90%. These results also strongly suggest that the DESLH is providing a safe and engaging learning space for female students, once they are in the course.

Figure 8. Female students enjoy high graduation rates

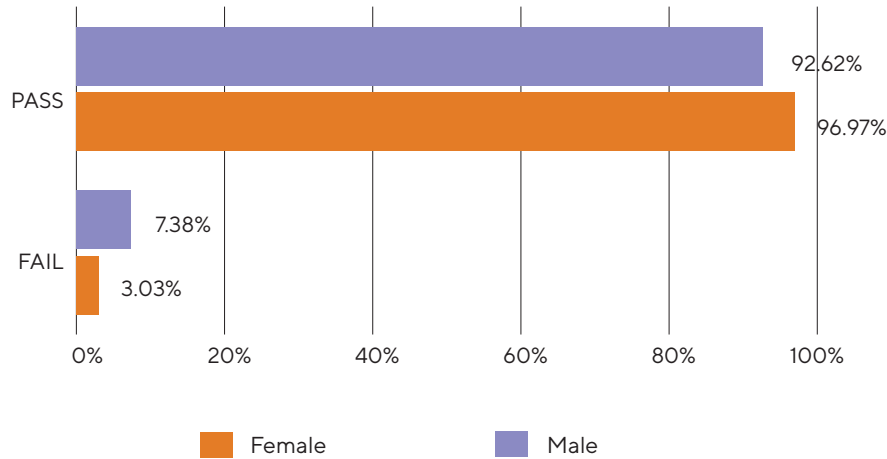


NB: There were no non-binary identifying students in this dataset.

## 4.6 Success rates and learning outcomes<sup>9</sup>

Pass rates and learning outcomes at the unit level also paint a promising picture in terms of female students' performance in the DESLH.

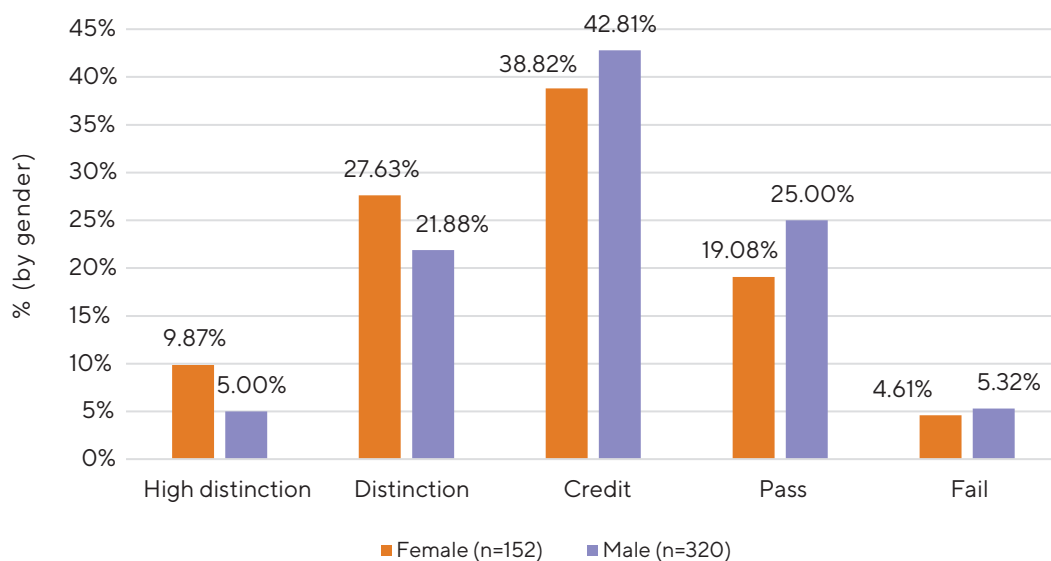
**Figure 9.** Gender disaggregated pass/fail rates for Units 2 and 4



Pass rates for the DESLH Unit 2 and Unit 4 intensives across all cohorts, for instance, show that on average, female participants achieved a slightly higher success rate than their male peers (image right). For these two intensive units, results from 271 male students and 132 female students were assessed (e.g. 32.75% percent of the assessed students for units 2 and 4 are women, the remaining 62.25% men).

Learning outcomes data also confirm that female students on average achieved higher numerical grades for Units 1 and 3 than their male peers. Figure 10 below, for instance, shows the grade distributions for Units 1 and 3—for which students receive a numerical grade and corresponding high distinction, distinction, credit, pass or fail mark—disaggregated by gender. Overall, women achieved a greater proportion of high distinction and distinction grades, and fewer fails, than their male peers, for these units.

**Figure 10.** Unit 1 and Unit 3 grade distributions by gender (all cohorts)



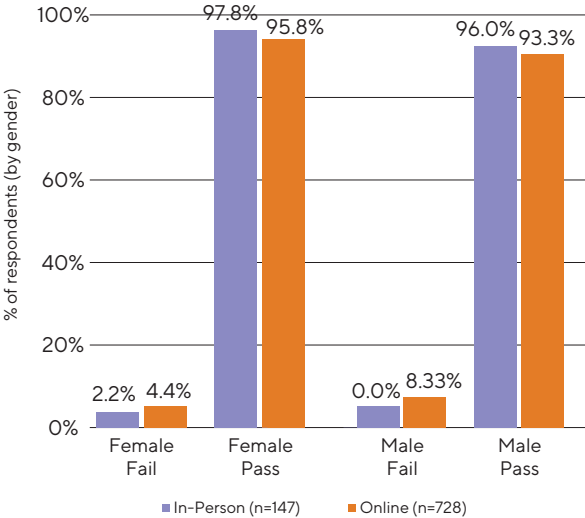
<sup>9</sup> For an explanation of grades/ success rates at Deakin University, please see: [www.deakin.edu.au/students/study-support/assessments-and-examinations/getting-your-results/results-key#Undergraduate\\_and\\_Postgraduate\\_Coursework-2147252](http://www.deakin.edu.au/students/study-support/assessments-and-examinations/getting-your-results/results-key#Undergraduate_and_Postgraduate_Coursework-2147252)

Similarly, when we look at data on students' success rates by modality (online and in-person), we see that a slightly higher proportion of male students failed online units (6.7%) compared to women (4.4%) (for more on these modalities, please see accompanying report).

This finding is of particular interest given women's reported challenges during online learning due to high domestic chore and parenting responsibilities on top of their learning.

These success rates and grade distributions are also significant when considered in the context of female graduates' reported anxieties about their ability to perform in academic settings, and women's comparative lack of educational opportunities—particularly in higher education—as discussed in this report.

**Figure 11.** Pass and fail rates by modality (gender)



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There is widespread support for improving gender equality in leadership across the Francophone humanitarian system. Female humanitarian leaders are seen as bringing expertise and skills, particularly in advocating for the most marginalised, affected communities, such as children and women.

However, major structural and system barriers prevent individuals and the system from achieving gender equality. There is also widespread perception among male and female francophone humanitarians that humanitarian organisations do not support employees in terms of family and caring responsibilities.

Women's perceived 'lack of confidence' was among the most frequently cited barriers to inclusion in leadership roles. On the one hand, confidence as an individual attribute may be addressed through quality leadership development, with data showing that the DESLH does in fact increase female candidate's confidence in their own abilities. On the other hand, this is a profoundly problematic finding: the perception that women's own 'lack of confidence' is preventing them from achieving leadership roles is a deficit framing (e.g. women are the problem), which devolves responsibility for the solution to the individual (the woman), rather than recognising the structural and systemic barriers that prevent women and gender-diverse people from being recognised for their leadership potential without confirming to a stereotype of what a 'confident' leader looks like.

Respondents proposed interventions and strategies—such as education and sensitization, using a 'positive masculinity approach, quotas/positive discrimination, and a 'do no harm' ethos—to help overcome these barriers towards greater gender equality and inclusion within leadership roles in the international humanitarian system.

Among the suggested interventions, leadership development and training for women was among the most frequently cited strategies overcoming the barriers to women's leadership. The DESLH has been found to improve participants' confidence, knowledge, attitudes, and skills in this regard, not only for women but also men.

While the DESLH can and is making a positive contribution to gender equality, however, systemic improvement is beyond the remit of one course: a whole-systems approach is needed to transform the humanitarian system towards meaningful inclusion and representation. The underlying structural and system barriers for women in the system needs to be understood by all in the system, if attitudes and practices are to change. The misconception, for instance, that 'equality' and 'equity' are the same thing—and that women's equality means treating everyone as if they have the same structural and systemic privileges—is a barrier to addressing the root causes and outcomes of gender inequality. Women face additional and differential barriers which will not be overcome through treating them on equal footing with individuals who do not face these same challenges.

In other words, gender inequality is not a 'woman problem,' and nor can it be fixed through a 'woman solution.' Gender equality is a right for all with implications for all: it will not be achieved by telling women to change (e.g. through training or leadership development courses). Achieving gender equality requires the whole system to prioritise targeted—if incremental—improvements across a range in interventions and levels, including gender-transformative leadership development, gender equitable policies and programming, meaningful advocacy and engagement, and a system-wide commitment to tracking and reporting on data on gender outcomes across the system.

# 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the two intended outcomes of this research study was to facilitate the development of evidence informed recommendations improving the gender balance in future cohorts of the DESLH. To this end, the final chapter presents key recommendations or considerations for what key DESLH stakeholders can do to increase the proportion of women in future cohorts. These recommendations have been developed based on the research evidence on gender and leadership, and analysis of DESLH data presented in this report.

## 6.1 Design and delivery

CHL could:

- Consider inclusivity and diversity of the DESLH faculty and guest speakers, recruiting where possible more women and experts from West and Central Africa to be involved in the delivery of the course;
- Ensure the curriculum is gender-transformative and adheres to feminist leadership principles, to ensure all graduates—including men—understand the causes and consequences of gender inequality, and the need for inclusive and representative leadership in the humanitarian system for an effective humanitarian response.

## 6.2 Recruitment and marketing

CHL and key partners could:

- Identify local and national women's networks—including informal networks on WhatsApp, Telegram or preferred social media platforms, as well as more formal women's leadership networks—to disseminate marketing information about the DESLH;
- Encourage female DESLH graduates to disseminate information about the course to female colleagues, peers, and networks;
- Proactively headhunt female participants for the DESLH, through engaging directly with local and national NGOs in the

Francophone world, and particularly West and Central Africa;

- Invite former DESLH graduates to nominate female colleagues whom they believe have the potential to thrive on the DESLH;
- Publish case studies on or profiles of successful female DESLH graduates, highlighting their experiences of the DESLH and encouraging other women to apply;
- Provide a longer window for applications, or disseminate information about the DESLH prior to the application window opening, to ensure applicants have enough time to consider their options and receive organisational approval.

## 6.3 Selection criteria and admissions

CHL and key partners could:

- Consider affirmative action criteria, to acknowledge women's comparative lack of access to educational and professional opportunities in many contexts;
- Consider providing a 'bridging course' or 'academic skills' course for female applicants who express concern about their ability to engage in a higher education setting;
- Encourage women who are new to academic settings to do the PLC prior to the DESLH, as introduction to formal learning environment;
- Consider a peer support group within the cohort, and consider providing additional mentoring opportunities or support for women.

## 6.4 Funding and resourcing

CHL and key partners could:

- Communicate more clearly the value of, eligibility for, and likelihood of receiving bursaries or financial assistance among prospective applicants;

- Secure additional funding to support female candidates through the DESLH, to overcome gender-based financial barriers to participation;
- Consider, where possible, gender-transformative funding options, including not only fee waivers or reductions for local and national NGO female applicants, but also discretionary funds or stipends for participants to overcome barriers related to child-minding or domestic responsibilities during online and residential intensives;
- Use these findings to develop a fuller research agenda on gender and leadership in the humanitarian system, both focusing on the themes identified and also including longitudinal study following graduates (n=10 or 15) over time.

## 6.5 Engagement and partnerships

CHL and key partners could:

- Work with target local and national organizations to communicate who the DESLH is intended for and encourage a proactive gender-transformative strategy to enable more women to participate in the DESLH;
- Partner with organizations that specialize in gender-transformative leadership;
- Investigate the possibility of asking organizations to provide women with time off for their studies, to reduce the workload of undertaking the DESLH.

## 6.6 Advocacy and policy

CHL and key partners could:

- Produce and publish research to promote awareness of the need for inclusive and diverse leadership across the humanitarian system;
- Engaging male participants on board into the advocacy as champions;

## 6.7 Research

CHL could:

- Conduct research exploring if modality (online and residential/ in-person learning) influences women's perceptions of how feasible it would be for them to complete the course;

### Recommendations for organisations

Organisations play a key role in leading and emulating change, in creating opportunities for women and providing the conditions in which they can thrive. Participants recommended a significant number of strategies for change that target organisations specifically.

In addition to ensuring policies and practices take into account women's specific needs in the workplace, organisations can help build women's capacities and confidence and create more leadership roles for women.

The following are some suggestions on ways to achieve this:

- Conduct a comprehensive gender analysis at all levels of the organisation, including applying a gender lens to all policies and practices, to inform strategies for change;
- Target and involve decisionmakers for education and awareness, so that they support measures that 'favour the recruitment of women';
- Recruitment policies that include quotas and positive discrimination to prioritise women for decision making roles;
- Build capacity and confidence of women: support professional training and personal development opportunities; support access to mentors or professional coaches;
- Improve working conditions through gender-transformative policies, such as maternity leave, carer's leave, flexible working hours, limit on hours worked away from home, child-care support, family postings; and
- Increase the safety of women in the workplace, by ensuring policies and practices are developed, well understood and enforced, 'among other measures.

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# ANNEX 1: RESEARCH DESIGN

## Research questions

This evaluation study focuses on two key questions:

- What is contributing to the gender imbalance in applications and enrolments for the DESLH?
- What can be done by key DESLH stakeholders to increase the proportion of women in future cohorts?

## Research methods

To answer these questions, the evaluation study involves a sequential, mixed-methods design to generate data for descriptive statistics and qualitative insights into the experiences of humanitarian workers in general and DESLH graduates in particular. This three-stage mixed-methods design is illustrated in Figure 1 below. All data collection—surveys, interviews, and focus groups—were conducted in French, to ensure the fullest participation among priority groups of respondents.

The online French-language survey was launched on 17 July 2023, with 115 respondents completing the consent form over 8 weeks.<sup>10</sup> 99 of these respondents provided gender data, including 52 male, 44 female, 1 non-binary, and 2 ‘prefer not to say’ respondents. A small proportion of the survey respondents included DESLH graduates, who were not excluded from participating.

Two populations were then included for interviews: survey respondents; and DESLH graduates. Respondents to the online survey were invited to express their interest in being interviewed: 55 survey respondents consented to be interviewed, of whom 30 completed an in-depth interview for this study.

To deepen insights from the survey and interview rounds, female DESLH graduates only were invited to participate in online focus group discussions. 2 focus groups were convened, with a total of 6 participants.

## Outcomes

As a result of key findings, the evaluation study will:

- Identify challenges faced by female Francophone humanitarian workers from West and Central Africa and other Francophone countries who wish to develop their humanitarian leadership skills
- Enable the development of evidence informed recommendations improving the gender balance in future cohorts of the DESLH.

## Methodological limitations and out of scope

All data collection was conducted in French, to allow a strategic focus on Francophone humanitarian perspectives, experiences, and contexts. Francophone researchers conducted the interviews and focus grouped and lead the first-round analysis,

Figure 12. Sequenced data collection methods and respondents



<sup>10</sup> 115 consent responses were recorded for the online survey. Response rates to individual items in the survey vary, with most respondents leaving some items blank.

which was then shared with the team for final reporting. Results were translated for an Anglophone audience, and reviewed by bilingual CHL staff.

Francophone humanitarians were invited to complete the anonymous online survey to gauge system perspectives on the topic of gender and leadership. As this survey was anonymous, the professional backgrounds and understanding of 'humanitarian' vary, with some respondents coming from a development or programming background. This diversity of views enriches our understanding of the topic, but does introduce variability in responses.

## Research ethics and integrity

### Ethical research compliance and regulations

The research is guided by all the relevant regulations and guidelines authorised by law, including (but not limited to):

- the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research
- the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

The research was fully compliant with these regulations and guidelines. While it is not anticipated that there will be any situations in which disclosure of information to a third party is necessary since the project is focused on understanding the impact of a leadership development program on professional development, all members of the research team will be required to be familiar with humanitarian tools and processes for reporting alleged misconduct in the event that they become aware of it. A statement that disclosure of alleged sexual exploitation and abuse misconduct is not protected by participant confidentiality is included in the PLSCF.

### Consent and plain language statements

Plain language statements and consent forms (in French) were shared with all participants prior to participation in all data collection methods. For survey respondents, PLS forms and consent were embedded into the survey protocol: only respondents who agreed that they have read the PLS and willingly gave their consent were directed to the survey items; any respondent who declined to consent was directed to the end of the survey. For key informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions, participants were provided with digital copies of the PLS and consent forms, which was signed and returned to the interviewer/ facilitator and stored in accordance with Deakin privacy policies.

# ANNEX 2: STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS FOR IMPROVING GENDER EQUALITY

*‘Invest in social protection policies and systems to create an environment in which women can access and thrive in formal and informal labour markets, such as family-related leave, childcare, flexible working hours and social security measures.’ [Male survey respondent]*

As discussed in the two previous sections, there is widespread support for improving gender equality across the Francophone humanitarian system, with both men and women generally reporting nuanced levels of insight into the barriers preventing women from attaining leadership roles.

So, what can be done about it?

The following is a summary of the most frequently proposed strategies for improving women’s participation and inclusion in leadership within the humanitarian system. While some strategies—such as training and development opportunities—target the level of the individual, many proposed strategies recognise the need for gender-transformative policies at the organisational and political level, such as quotas, maternity leave and flexible working conditions.

## **Education, training, and sensitisation at all levels**

Participants consistently call for education and sensitisation of wide-ranging actors, at all levels of society, including men and women, local communities and all levels of government (traditional, local, regional and national). They also highlight the need for more sensitisation of donors and other entities within the humanitarian system.

There is a need for greater understanding of the rights of women, the specific challenges they face and the benefits of equal participation in leadership, and the need for greater action to achieve this. Specifically, participants consistently call for greater

education and sensitisation of all actors on the following:

- The rights of women (including equality and equal access to education);
- Gender equality and gender equity (including the different needs of men and women);
- The need to ‘lift the barriers women that reduce the value of women’ and prevent them accessing and staying in leadership roles (survey respondent);
- The benefits of having more women in senior management roles;
- The need to ‘deconstruct destructive norms’ and the ‘popular mentality’ that women are less capable than men;
- The need to increase the profile of female leaders and their achievements.

## **Using a ‘positive masculinity’ approach to sensitise men**

*‘Focusing part of the discourse on positive masculinity, removing systemic barriers to access, but also reconsidering the qualities and abilities needed to be a good leader.’ [Male respondent, survey]*

When working to sensitise and educate men on the above, some participants urged that we ‘focus the discourse on positive masculinity’ and support men’s ability to identify the difference in women’s needs, compared to men. They emphasised that it is important to demonstrate how and why women do not have the same level of access to leadership roles.

In addition to these efforts to educate and sensitise all actors, participants suggest the following additional strategies are needed for particular actors.

## Targeting women

‘We need to relight a flame right at the heart of the female population because it is the barriers, self-imposed barriers that [result in] women making little of themselves... and a good number of our female colleagues tell themselves Well, I am just a secretary or I am just whatever, so, I can’t. Me, I am just a midwife. I made it to a mobile clinic, in the humanitarian space and today I am operations director, which is a way to say that we have to manage to light a flame that allows women to be more ambitious because they limit themselves most of the time. It is women themselves who limit themselves to some roles, to small roles. So, we have to succeed at this.’ [FGD]

Although women require family and societal conditions and structures to change, there are recommended efforts aimed at women, who must step up and not simply sit ‘*waiting with their arms crossed for men to come and push and place them*’. In particular, participants suggested strategies for building confidence and capacity. These include the following:

- Build the visibility and level of prominence of female role models to ‘light a flame that enables women to be more ambitious’ by providing examples of women who have risen from similar positions or situations and have overcome challenges to expand their horizons ;
- Develop greater awareness of the capacity and benefits for personal development;
- Provide training and development opportunities for women and take their specific needs into account to ensure they can attend. Include opportunities for personal development, English language acquisition, and training on leadership and the humanitarian system, to build skills and understanding of what leadership roles involve;
- Provide access to mentors and coaches to help build capacity and confidence;
- Encourage women to apply for leadership development opportunities and roles;

### ‘Do no harm’ approach

It is also critical to ensure a ‘do no harm’ approach to change so that there is no backlash against women, particularly if men perceive efforts to support women

as favouritism or simply a matter of increasing their numbers in leadership and ‘*choosing women to choose women*.’ Messaging is important to ensure women do not view opportunities as a form of ‘*privilege*’. This also reinforces the recommended strategies mentioned above, to build men’s understanding of the barriers women face and to encourage women to build their capacities. Coaching for women was viewed as one way to help build capacity without creating negative perceptions of favouritism.

*‘Before finishing this topic, I also think that perhaps we should pay attention to what can be perceived as favouritism towards women. We are not asking women to wait with arms crossed for men to come position or push them. It is work. Everyone has to play their part, at every level which means these messages must reach women as well.’* [FGD]

## Target organisations, donors, and the whole humanitarian system

To achieve gender equality, systemic change is needed and organisations and structures must adapt and create the change needed for women to participate equally. Below are some of the key strategies participants believed will contribute to change. As participants highlighted, change must begin with an analysis within organisations and of the whole humanitarian system, to understand where they are at and to inform what must be done.

*‘Before seeing what has to be put in place, once we know in fact, what is the position of the organisation, what is the position in relation to gender within the system ?’* [11AlumF]

## Organisations

Organisations play a key role in leading and emulating change, in creating opportunities for women and providing the conditions in which they can thrive. Participants recommended a number of strategies that organisations could implement, for instance:

- Conduct a comprehensive gender analysis at all levels of the organisation, including applying a gender lens to all policies and practices, to inform strategies for change
- Target and involve decisionmakers for education and awareness, so that they support measures that ‘favour the recruitment of women’;

- Recruitment policies that include quotas and positive discrimination to prioritise women for decision making roles;
- Build capacity and confidence of women: support professional training and personal development opportunities; support access to mentors or professional coaches;
- Improve working conditions through gender-transformative policies, such as maternity leave, carer's leave, flexible working hours, limit on hours worked away from home, child-care support, family postings;
- Increase the safety of women in the workplace, by ensuring policies and practices are developed, well understood and enforced, 'among other measures.
- Advocate for gender equality and for governments to address barriers to women's participation;
- Address concerns for the lack of safety of female humanitarian workers;
- Help redefine leadership and '*what is a good leader*';
- Recognise the importance of '*the culture of consortiums*' and networks where '*each member supports the other*' and influence and leverage this to promote gender equality;
- Establish mentoring programs and provide networking opportunities for women;
- Strengthen support measures for women in the humanitarian system;

### Humanitarian System

The following are strategies participants believed are important for key structures representing the humanitarian system to better support women to attain and maintain leadership roles:

- Conduct a comprehensive gender analysis to inform strategies for change.
- Provide political leadership, activism and advocacy to change public perceptions and policies.
- Lead by example and establish the '*norm of representation in the system*', ensure there is female leadership of leading bodies and make them visible; and strengthen communication on '*what women are capable of, with concrete examples*'
- Establish a 'role model' program that makes female leaders more visible;

Gender inequality in humanitarian leadership is, however, a complex challenge: there are no single solutions or interventions that will make a difference at scale. The gender norms which inform leadership, the humanitarian systems, and wider social systems are deeply entrenched. These barriers inform the challenges faced by female applicants and participants in the DESLH—and so merited discussion here—but these systemic barriers are beyond the scope of an individual leadership program to address. The remainder of this report therefore concentrates on the role and context of the DESLH in the recruitment and development of female leaders from West and Central Africa, who face these and other gender-based hurdles in their personal and professional lives.



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